

PREACHING TO A NEW GENERATION: BABY BOOMERS AND THE
IMPLICATIONS OF THIS PHENOMENON FOR MAINLINE PREACHING

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John Gerald Furman

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JOHN GERALD FURMAN

*has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty
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fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of*

Faculty Committee

J. Guerin Frotter
Chen-Hsi Kinn

April 22, 1992
Date

Ally Moore
Dean

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ABSTRACT

Preaching to a New Generation: Baby Boomers and the Implications of this Phenomenon for Mainline Preaching

John Gerald Furman

Baby boomers are the generation of 76 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964. Disillusioned by Vietnam and Watergate and suspicious of institutions, baby boomers dropped out of church during the turbulent sixties and stayed away. Now baby boomers are beginning to return to church in record numbers, but a disproportionate number is not choosing to join mainline denominational churches. Inasmuch as baby boomers make up one-third of the population, this generation's absence has contributed significantly to the numerical decline of the mainline churches. What can mainline pastors do to draw baby boomers into their congregations?

Effective preaching is a major factor in determining where baby boomers go to church. This project seeks to discover approaches to mainline denominational preaching that effectively communicate to the baby boom generation. The commentary of four mainline pastors who are preaching to growing numbers of baby boomers in their congregations suggests that preaching which most effectively communicates to baby boomers is biblical, personal, and practical.

Biblical preaching is most effective with baby boomers when it introduces and explains characters, background, and doctrines in contemporary terms. Personal preaching is most effective with baby boomers when it emphasizes how the story of the gospel can be seen as the story of our lives. Practical preaching is most effective with baby boomers when intrinsic to its "how to," life-oriented focus is the underlying "how to" of how to make meaning out of a disillusioning and confusing world.

Chapter 1 introduces the problem, states the thesis, and defines the terms to be used. Chapter 2 identifies the main characteristics that make up the baby boom generation. Chapter 3 relates the numerical decline of the mainline denominations to the absence of the baby boomers. Chapter 4 examines numerical church growth from the New Testament perspective of faithfulness to the gospel. Chapter 5 provides insights into the religious attitudes and values that influence baby boomers in their choice of a church. Chapters 6-10 introduce the commentary of four mainline pastors who are preaching to growing numbers of baby boomers in their congregations. Chapter 11 sums up the findings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Vernon C. Grounds in LEADERSHIP Journal, Winter 1981.
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NEWSWEEK, 22 December, 1986, "From 'Mainline' to Sideline."
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The Problem Addressed by This Project

The problem addressed by this project is to find preaching strategies for mainline denominational pastors that will help them more effectively preach to the baby boom generation.

Importance of the Problem

Describing baby boomers in his article "A Generation on the Doorstep", Ken Sidey observes:

They are the largest . . . generation ever to populate this country. they have filled nurseries, overflowed schools, captured campuses, captivated Madison Avenue, and flooded job markets. But they have seldom been seen in church. Until, perhaps, now. Born between 1946 and 1964, a generation of 76 million Americans - nearly one-third of the present population - has shaped everything it's touched.¹

The baby boom generation, disillusioned by Vietnam and Watergate and suspicious of institutions, dropped out of church during the turbulent sixties and stayed away. Now baby boomers are beginning to return to church in record numbers, but they are not, as yet, choosing to join mainline denominational churches with any frequency.

In an article on the declining membership in the mainline churches, Kenneth Woodward, religion editor for Newsweek magazine, notes that in the past mainline denominational youth tended to drop out of church in their late teens and early twenties, only to return as they became parents. But, notes Woodward, most baby boomers who grew up in the liberal Protestant churches have not only drifted away, but stayed away from the mainline churches of their childhood.²

I am concerned about this. Why? I think many baby boomers who dropped out of their mainline churches have been searching for answers in a disappointing and confusing world. Some have turned to fundamentalism, but have been turned off by the rigidity and hypocrisy of legalism. Others have turned to New Age spirituality, but have been disillusioned by its deification of the self and its lack of a central moral core.

I believe, because of their theological heritage, mainline churches provide the balance of morality, faith, and spiritual freedom that the baby boom generation seeks to discover. One of the characteristics of mainline churches is an approach to the gospel that is both personal and corporate. Mainline churches have been willing both to grapple with social issues and to provide a prophetic voice in dealing with global concerns. The mainline denominations

also have the ability and willingness to walk with people as they travel on their journey of faith.

I believe that the mainline denominational churches offer the gospel in a way that allows a person to struggle with it and discover God's will for them in the world. Mainline churches also understand the whole business of being an ecumenical church, of being larger than any one denomination, of being open to people who are united in a commitment to Christ, but who may see things differently in other areas.

Baby boomers need to hear what the mainline churches have to say. But I am also concerned that the disproportionate absence of younger adults of the baby boom generation in the mainline churches has been seen as a major factor in the numerical decline of the mainline denominations.

Again, it is not that baby boomers are not returning to church at all. The fact is that baby boomers are now beginning to return to church in record numbers. It is just that they are not joining in any great numbers in the mainline churches in which they grew up. This is significant to mainline denominational numerical decline because, "the flight of baby boomers from organized religion in the 1960s and '70s, demographic studies have shown, was largely responsible for the dramatic membership decline experienced by many religious bodies during those years."³ And this

decline was felt most in the mainline churches. The result is the graying of the mainline churches.

The Presbyterian Church USA observes that

every 15 minutes another Presbyterian reaches the age of 65. Each day approximately 100 church members reach retirement age. More than half of all Presbyterians are now over fifty years of age and that percentage is increasing, as more than 35,000 members of the Church become older adults each year.⁴

It is not that, in a culture that all too readily worships youth and distorts the importance of being and looking young, that the younger adults of the baby boom generation ought to be seen as being of more value as members than adults of preceding generations. Ageism, much like sexism or racism, could only exert a destructive influence on the church and prevent mature adults from discovering their full humanity within Christ's Church. Yet the disproportionate absence of younger adults of the baby boom generation in the mainline church has been seen as a major factor in the numerical decline of the mainline denominations.

Major factors in this numerical decline, according to a recent report, include death, low birth rates, and "one-third of the generation known as the Baby Boomers leaving the church and not returning."⁵ What are they looking for that they do not find in the mainline denominations?

In an article entitled "Twenty-One Steps to Reaching the Baby Boomers," church growth analyst Lyle Schaller writes:

In recent years I have asked several thousand new members this question: "Why did you join this church? There are lots of churches around here; why did you pick this one?" Younger adults usually begin their response by praising the preaching, the meaningful content of the sermons, and the communication skills of the preacher. This is especially pronounced among those who (a) left the denomination in which they were reared when they joined this congregation and (b) were born after 1955. By contrast, a majority of those born before 1935 identify their denominational affiliation as the number-one factor in choosing a new church home. It is difficult to overstate the power of good preaching today, and it usually is the number-one factor in determining where the baby boomers go to church.⁶

Schaller is quick to point out a difference between older and younger baby boomers in this survey. Older baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1956, says Schaller, are choosing churches more with an emphasis on children's educational ministries and contemporary worship. Younger baby boomers, born between 1956 and 1964 though, are choosing a church with an emphasis on preaching.⁷

Whether contemporary worship, childrens' ministries, or preaching is most important to baby boomers in choosing a church, the data shows that preaching is of great significance. According to a recent survey of baby boomers who have selected a church, the five most cited reasons for choosing a church are the worship service, the pastor, good sermons, feeling accepted, and programs for children. While

the worship service is the most cited reason for selecting a congregation, the pastor and good sermons are the next most cited reasons.⁸

What is the preaching like that communicates best to baby boomers? That is the substance of my thesis.

Thesis

Preaching that most effectively communicates to baby boomers is biblical, personal, and practical. This project identifies these three characteristics based on interviews with four mainline pastors who are preaching to a growing number of baby boomers in their congregations. Prior to this project, both Michael Williams and Bob Bast (see Chapter 6) identified these characteristics as most effective in preaching to baby boomers as well. Yet this project not only independently confirms their findings, but substantiates them based on research and presents how these three preaching characteristics may most effectively be used in preaching situations.

This project suggests that biblical preaching is most effective with baby boomers when it introduces and explains characters, background, and doctrines in contemporary terms. This project suggests that personal preaching is most effective with baby boomers when it emphasizes how the story of the gospel can be seen as the story of our lives. And this project suggests that practical preaching is most

effective with baby boomers when intrinsic to its "how to," life-oriented focus is the underlying "how to" of how to make meaning out of a disillusioning and confusing world.

Definition of Major Terms

Several terms are worthy of definition.

Baby boomers: Americans born between 1946 and 1964. These are not all yuppies (young urban professionals). In fact yuppies make up only about 3 percent of this generation.⁹ Baby boomers may themselves be divided by age into two groups: the early boomers and the late boomers. The early boomers were born between 1946 and 1957. They were most influenced by the social consciousness and idealism of the '60s and '70s. The late boomers were born between 1957 and 1964 and are thought of as the Me Generation--"generally lacking a deeply developed social consciousness and seeking the American dream full steam ahead."¹⁰

Mainline Church: Those denominations with membership in the National Council of Churches.

Church Growth: My definition is less concerned with the numbers of people than with the faithfulness of sharing the gospel and living out the Christian life. The term church growth though, especially in what has come to be known as the Church Growth Movement, has all too frequently come to be thought of almost exclusively as statistics,

documentation, and sociological theory. Chapter 4, "Church Growth Critique," is devoted to challenging that assumption. Authentic church growth is that which results from being faithful to God.

Preaching: Proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of God through the sermon form of oral communication.

Work Previously Done in the Field

Michael Williams, director of Preaching Ministries, Section of Worship, United Methodist Board of Discipleship, has discovered five observations (including biblical, personal, and practical) for preaching to baby boomers which are cited in Chapter 6 of this project, "Preaching to a New Generation." Juxtaposing ten approaches to the sermon form, Williams explains why five are effective in communicating to baby boomers and the other five are not.

In his book The Missing Generation, author Bob Bast also suggests that effective preaching to baby boomers should be biblical, personal, and practical.¹¹ Sociologist Wade Clark Roof in his study of baby boomers observes that preaching to baby boomers should be a blend of authoritarianism and psychological insight.¹²

Doug Murren, author of The Baby Boomerang, offers seven suggestions for preaching to baby boomers and lists nine "life issues" frequently mentioned by baby boomers as being of particular spiritual interest.¹³

Scope and Limitations of the Project

The intent of this project is to discover and examine approaches to mainline denominational preaching that most effectively communicate to the baby boom generation. To accomplish this the project examines the baby boom generation and analyzes the relationship between the numerical decline in the mainline denominations and the disproportionate absence of baby boomers in the mainline churches. It then examines characteristics of baby boomer spirituality and the factors operative in their recent high rate of return to churches outside the mainline denominations. It then discusses current thinking on preaching to the baby boom generation.

Finally the project presents the commentary of four mainline pastors who are recognized by their denominational leaders as preaching to growing numbers of baby boomers in their congregations. It offers highlights of their thinking on preaching to baby boomers and provide samples of their sermons both to show their ideas in action and to provide models for other pastors to preach more effectively to baby boomers in their own churches.

Again, prior to this project, both Michael Williams and Bob Bast also identified preaching that is biblical, personal, and practical as most effective in preaching to baby boomers. Yet this project not only independently confirms their findings, but substantiates them based on

research and presents how these three preaching characteristics may most effectively be used in preaching situations.

For reasons of travel, the project limits its search to preachers within the greater Los Angeles area only. For reasons of their scarcity, it limits its research to four pastors who are preaching to growing numbers of baby boomers. These preachers are of four different mainline denominations. In providing the observations of these four preachers, I hope to demonstrate my thesis that the preaching which most effectively communicates to baby boomers is preaching which is biblical, personal, and practical.

Procedure for Integration

This project integrates the three areas of preaching, church growth, and New Testament. Insofar as preaching is a factor in church growth it is vital to reversing the numerical decline of the mainline denominational churches. Church growth, to be faithful to the gospel, must find in the New Testament its authentic significance. Therefore the project includes New Testament analysis to establish a biblical perspective on church growth. Through library research and taped interviews (edited as commentary) this project seeks to provide insight into the problem of finding preaching strategies for mainline denominational preachers

that will help them more effectively to communicate to baby boomers.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1, "Introduction," introduces the problem, states the thesis, and defines the terms to be used. Chapter 2, "Ministry to a New Generation," identifies the influences that have helped shape the baby boom generation and defines the main characteristics that make up this generation. This chapter suggests reasons for the baby boomers' renewed spiritual interest and recent return to church attendance. Chapter 3, "The Numerical Decline of the Mainline Church," documents the numerical decline of the mainline denominations and locates a major cause in the disproportionate absence of the baby boom generation.

Chapter 4, "Church Growth Critique," examines the current preoccupation with numerical church growth and reexamines church growth from the New Testament perspective of faithfulness to the gospel. Chapter 5, "Baby Boom Spirituality," provides insight into the religious attitudes and values that influence baby boomers in their choice of a church. The overall theme of individualism versus community is discussed here. Chapter 6, "Preaching to a New Generation," surveys current thinking on preaching to baby boomers and introduces the four mainline preachers (Gary Collins, Bob Morley, Rick Nelson, and Chuck Shields) whose

commentary helps support the thesis of this project that the preaching which most effectively communicates to baby boomers is biblical, personal, and practical.

Chapter 7, "Interview and Sermons: Gary Collins," emphasizes the importance of story in preaching to baby boomers by examining how the story of the gospel is lived out in the stories of our lives. Chapter 8, "Interview and Sermons: Bob Morley," discusses the influence television and motion pictures have had on the baby boom generation and suggests some implications for preaching. Chapter 9, "Interview and Sermons: Rick Nelson," underscores the appreciation baby boomers have for preaching that struggles openly with the difficult questions of living. Chapter 10, "Interviews and Sermons: Chuck Shields," emphasizes the importance of grace in addressing the baby boom generation's felt need for love and acceptance. Chapter 11, "Conclusion," sums up the findings of this project.

NOTES

Chapter 1

- ¹ Ken Sidey, "A Generation on the Doorstep," Moody Monthly, January 1987, 22.
- ² Kenneth Woodward, "From 'Mainline' to Sideline," Newsweek, 22 December 1986, 55.
- ³ Gene Williams, "Can Membership Decline Be Stopped?" Presbyterian Outlook, 3 June 1991, 4.
- ⁴ Otto Gruber, letter to pastors of Los Ranchos (Calif.) Presbytery, Presbyterian Church (USA), 15 May 1991.
- ⁵ "Report Predicts Return of the Baby Boomers," Los Angeles Times, 3 August 1991, F21.
- ⁶ Lyle Schaller, "Twenty-One Steps to Reaching the Baby Boomers," Net Results, March 1989, 1.
- ⁷ Lyle Schaller, telephone interview with author, 16 October 1990.
- ⁸ "Why Baby Boomers Return to Church," Presbyterian Outlook, 15 October 1990, 16.
- ⁹ Sidey, 24.
- ¹⁰ Hans Finzel, Help! I'm a Baby Boomer! (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1989), 18.
- ¹¹ Bob Bast, The Missing Generation (Monrovia, Calif.: Church Growth Publ., 1991), 157.
- ¹² Wade Clark Roof, "Baby Boomers and the Implications of this Phenomenon for Our Church and Religious Studies," lecture, School of Theology, Claremont, Calif., 9 October 1990.
- ¹³ Doug Murren, The Baby Boomerang (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1990).

CHAPTER 2

Ministry to a New Generation

Baby boomers: the Spock generation, TV generation, Pepsi generation, Love generation, Woodstock generation, Rock generation, Protest generation, Now generation, Vietnam generation, Big Chill generation, the Me generation. Baby Boomers are a product of World War II, nuclear fears, television, Sputnik, rock and roll, the Cuban missile crisis, the Kennedy and King assassinations, the protest movement, Vietnam, and the counter culture of the '60s.

Paul Light in his book Baby Boomers writes of this generation:

In just forty years, the baby boomers have seen the first space satellite, Russia's Sputnik, as it orbited the earth, practiced hiding under school desks to avoid the cold war's nuclear threat, watched horrifying footage of a president being slain, experienced the sexual revolution, witnessed nonviolent marches turn to racial clashes after the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., flicked the televised Vietnam War and its protestors on and off, followed the Watergate scandal and the resignation of president Richard Nixon, watched OPEC oil prices go up, Jimmy Carter go down, and Ronald Reagan proclaim "Morning in America."¹

Light calls baby boomers, "the most analyzed, overgeneralized, stereotyped, and caricatured generation ever."² Yet, Light maintains, it is perhaps the least understood.

In his article "A Generation On The Doorstep" Ken Sidey, says of baby boomers:

Characterizing an entire generation is impossible. But the shared experiences of the Baby Boomers have produced in them a new and often troubling character. Television. Rock 'n' roll. The bomb. Birth control. J.F.K. Martin Luther King. Vietnam. Watergate. Women's lib. Looking out for number one. These helped shape the postwar babies who hold few absolutes, question authority, and openly voice their opinions.³

Landon Jones in his book Great Expectations gives this overview of the baby boom generation:

This is a generation that has always seen itself as unique, and can be understood as a generational unit. This is a generation that was once united in its conviction that it has a mission to develop fulfillment and harmony and to create wholeness in people. Now it is moving from optimism to pessimism. This is a generation which grew up with unrealistic and unachievable expectations. Now it has bumped up against limits. This is a generation that has helped create skepticism which challenges all our institutions and values. Now authority is everywhere in decline, and all truth is relative. This is a generation that has redefined the family norm and allowed for the acceptance of a host of different lifestyles.⁴

Baby boomers' attitudes run the gamut, observes Ken Sidey, from "Do your own thing" to "If it feels good, do it" to "God is dead," and that along with its immense size it is a constant focus of media attention. Sidey provides this statistical profile of baby boomers:

1) Born between 1946 and 1964 they are 76 million strong. 2) They are twice as likely as their parents to have gone to college, and five times as likely to be divorced. 3) About 80 percent of 40-year-old men and 77 percent of women the same age are married or have remarried. 4) Seventy

percent of the women work. 5) Contrary to the advertised image, yuppies (young urban professionals) make up only about 3 percent of this generation. 6) Thirty-five percent of the men and 63 percent of the women earn less than \$10,000 per year. Thirty-one percent of the men and 26 percent of the women earn \$10,000 to \$19,000 per year. 7) About 64 percent of those in the 30 to 40 age group say they have become more conservative in their political views, while 27 percent say less conservative. 8) In 1983, about half of all young families owned their homes, but more than half of those needed two incomes to do it. 9) According to a People magazine poll, 44 percent feel that "living together before marriage is a good idea," 29 percent think marijuana should be legalized, and 37 percent agree that "casual sex is acceptable."⁵

There are two waves of baby boomers maintains Hans Finzel in his book Help! I'm a Baby Boomer: the early boomers and the late boomers. "The half of our generation born in or before 1957 was the most influenced by the turbulent '60s and early '70s" he writes. "It is this group that is now turning 40 and making its values felt across our land."⁶ These are the boomers of the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy assassination, the moon landing, Woodstock, Vietnam, and Watergate. "The triumphs and tragedies of the early boomers," continues Finzel, "were merely pages from newly published history books to their younger siblings born after 1957."⁷

Michelle Ingrassia notes of these two waves of baby boomers the the older half was the more idealistic but, therefore, also more susceptible to disillusionment. The younger half, on the other hand, grew up with lower expectations and a more realistic world view. The older

half was more euphoric and felt they could change the world. The younger half, on the other hand, experienced no vision for a new tomorrow and concentrated on making as much as they could out of what is.⁸

Speaking of these two waves of baby boomers Finzel concludes that the earlier group got better educations and a choice of jobs. The later group got what was left over from the glut of early boomers and therefore has found fewer doors open in higher education and in the work place. As a result, maintains Finzel, "it is this group of late boomers that is probably thought of as the 'Me Generation,' lacking a deeply developed social consciousness and seeking the American dream full steam ahead."⁹

Is the baby boom generation therefore two generations? No, maintain both Finzel and Ingrassia. There is much that they have in common. Landon Jones not only confirms the existence of two waves of baby boomers, but lists thirteen areas in which both older and younger baby boomers carry what he calls "shared baggage."

1) Its large size. In 1990 one-third of the U.S population was between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four.

2) Its education. About half of all baby boomers have attended college and approximately one quarter are college graduates.

3) Its assumption of affluence. The baby boomers' idea of an appropriate living standard was fixed, for many of them, on the living standards of the 1950s and early 1960s . . . with its extraordinary tranquility and prosperity.

4) Its feeling of specialness. It is in part due to the experience of being "sold to" all their lives. The baby boomers believe that products can and indeed should be made specially for them as choosing individuals.

5) Its quest for authenticity. The baby boomers want down-to-earth products--the unfrilly, the authentic, the direct, the honest, the real.

6) Its new values. Daniel Yankelovich points out that the baby boomers have embraced the material goals of their parents but . . . have rejected as unnecessary their parents' ethic of sacrifice and denial.

7) Its nostalgia impulse. The mining of the baby boomers' premature nostalgia . . . has if anything become more frenzied. Movies like The Big Chill have done their part --but even more omnipresent are TV ad campaigns seeking to tap emotional chords with the songs of the 1960s.

8) Its lack of traditional families. Baby boomers have redefined marriage and childbearing as optional life-styles. They marry later, marry less often, have fewer children, and divorce more often. They are making diversity the norm.

9) Marriage. Marriage is today just an option for the baby boomers.

10) Divorce. Today 20 percent of existing marriages include at least one previously married spouse.

11) Single parents. Nearly one in five households with children are headed by women without husbands.

12) Its ambitious women. Sometime in the next century, historians will look back on this generation and come to a single conclusion: By far the most significant legacy of the baby boom was its extraordinary group of women.

13) Its short attention span. Fads continue to arrive and depart from the baby boom at whiplash speed.¹⁰

D. Quinn Mills, in his book Not Like Our Parents, provides the following characteristics of baby boomers in contrast to their parents' generation: baby boomers value experiences over possessions, suspicion of authority over acceptance of direction, fun over duty, opportunity over

security, relationships over both possessions and status and candor over tact.¹¹

Bob Bast, author of The Missing Generation, notes five common characteristics of the baby boom generation. First, he observes, is high expectations of material prosperity, scientific and medical advances, meaningful careers, intimacy in marriage, and ecological and political reform. Insofar as these expectations are unrealistic their result is frustration and disappointment. Second is the psychology of affluence. Though baby boomers recently have been forced to rediscover the appeal of a simplified lifestyle in the face of material limits, "the assumption that the continual accumulation of possessions is both possible and desirable" remains.¹²

Third is emotional expressiveness symbolized by the enduring slogan, "Let it all hang out." While more mature and restrained today, baby boomers continue to believe in the open expression of their emotions and to value genuineness and authenticity in personal relationships. Fourth is individualism. For instance baby boomers value freedom of choice, tending to be independent of party politics and displaying little brand loyalty. Baby boomers still value a high degree of tolerance and diversity of lifestyles. Fifth is distrust of institutions. Baby boomers "lost faith in their institutions and leaders in the 1960s, and have yet to recover."¹³ A result of this

anti-institutional bias, maintains Bast, is a tendency toward non affiliation with any organized group.

Bast concludes with these additional observations about the baby boom generation:

Baby boomers tend not to be guilt motivated and do not respond to "shoulds" and "should-nots." They value self-reliance and have a strong independent streak. They are introspective and considerably given to self analysis. Paul Light speaks of the legacy of the 1960s producing a sense of wistfulness and unfulfilled dreams. Baby boomers are pragmatic, with a strong interest in what works. They rely on their own experience. And, they are given to questioning. More than any other generation, baby boomers are inclined to compare, question, and analyze.¹⁴

The difference between baby boomers and preceding generations, suggests Jack Sims, president of B.O.O.M.E.R.S. (a consulting firm for the understanding of spiritual values and motivations of baby boomers), is an unprecedented access to consumer electronics. Never before has a generation had such immersion in and love for technology. Writes Sims, "Televison, radio, rock music, and computers have shaped the way we think, work and play."¹⁵

But Paula Rinehart, currently working on a book on the spiritual disillusionment of the baby boom generation, notes that the baby boom generation's sheer size is perhaps the single major source of its impact on our culture. Contends Rinehart: "Education, the mass media, health care, and economics have all felt [the baby boom's] influence."¹⁶ Rinehart poses the question therefore of this generation's

impact on the church in the nineties: "How will the church reach and influence its members as the adults who people our pews--or, as the case may be, who boogie nonchalantly to nostalgic music while they wash cars and watch us leave for church?"¹⁷

A 1986 Rolling Stone survey of baby boomers cites discouraging news for the church reporting that half those polled replied that, "they were less involved in organized religion than they expected they would be when they were younger."¹⁸ Rinehart offers a reason for this report, suggesting that baby boomers, of all other generations, are "the least trusting of almost every institution, whether the military, banks, public schools, Congress, or organized religion."¹⁹

Yet Rinehart insists that despite this institutional wariness there is also a spiritual sensitivity, a hunger for a reawakening of idealism. Rinehart suggests that this is so because 40 million baby boomers, confronting the challenges of midlife, are frustrated by life. "Twice as many boomers (as compared to their parents)," Rinehart observes, "are disappointed with what they have thus far achieved in life. The gap between their perceived potential and realized achievements is often dishearteningly large."²⁰

This disparity between hope and reality results in frustration unknown by baby boomers' parents. Jack Sheen, a licensed psychologist in Baltimore, whose practice consists

largely of baby boomers, maintains that, "While survival issues dominated the lives of their parents this generation has asked for much more from life: fulfillment, intimacy, pleasure--goals that are elusive to define or realize and thus fertile ground for disillusionment."²¹ In addition Paula Rinehart finds further evidence of the growing frustration of great expectations among baby boomers in the fact that the depression rate among this generation is ten times that of the previous one.²²

Observing the baby boom generation as having an overriding sense of entitlement, Mike Bellah, author of Baby Boom Believers, characterizes baby boomers as overexpecters who have a sense that they deserve it all: a college education, a secure retirement, the best medical care, a nice home in the suburbs, individual personal happiness.²³ Bellah cites Time magazine's tribute to the nation's youth in 1967 which encouraged this kind of thinking. The Time article stated: "In its lifetime, this promising generation could land on the moon, cure cancer and the common cold, lay out blight-proof, smog free cities, help end racial prejudice, enrich the underdeveloped world and, no doubt, write an end to poverty and war."²⁴

Television commercials also play a role in reinforcing baby boomers' sense of generational entitlement. "You deserve a break today (McDonalds);" "Have it your way (Burger King);" "This I do for me (Clairol);" and "Yes, you

can have it all (Michelob Light)" were only four of the over 300,000 commercial messages that promoted the basic assumption of a generation: "personal gratification is the dominant goal in life."²⁵

Jack Sims maintains that because of the disappointments and frustrations of baby boomers, baby boomers have a real spiritual interest. Because of their struggles observes Sims, "they want to get in touch with the supernatural and they will get in touch with it--somehow."²⁶

Bob Bast also contends that the baby boom generation has not found what it has been looking for. Bast, citing Peter Hoffman in an article in the New York Times, sees the "me" generation in danger now of becoming the "flee" generation insofar as they are running away from all the disappointments that they have experienced. But Bast observes that they are still searching. Bast calls it an exploration. To Bast baby boomers will be coming, not out of commitment, but a desire to explore. He suggests that "they are exploring commitment."²⁷

The New Age movement is seen as becoming appealing to a growing number of baby boomers because of the baby boom's yearning for the spiritual. George Barna, president of Barna Research Group that has studied baby boomers, observes:

having tasted and tried other New Age and materialistic options, a fair number of boomers are returning to the church in search of something real. It's another stop on their

journey but hopefully, it will also be the last.²⁸

Barna concludes, encouragingly for the churches, that the "need to belong will make [baby boomers] the most important source of church growth in the coming decade."²⁹ Indeed most research suggests baby boomers are beginning to come back to church.

Baby boomers, maintains Ken Sidey, are looking for a church now more than ever before. Sidey attributes this both to baby boomers' newly awakened search for values, in large part for their children, and to their disappointment and disillusionment in the face of their great expectations out of life.³⁰ Jeffrey Hadden at the University of Virginia notes that especially people in their 40s are eager to return to church. Observes Hadden, "They say, 'Here I am at 40, and what else is there? I've got my Volvo, my drug crisis, and my marriage crisis.'"³¹ Hadden contends that the time is here for the baby boomers' return.

Two basic reasons why the baby boomers are returning to religion are cited by sociologist Wade Clark Roof. One is concern about moral and religious training for children "that doesn't come with the birth of the child, but by about age five when one has to figure out what you're going to do with this little thing." The other is a concern about "one's own sense of life and whether or not one has found in one's own experience of life, marriage, job, and children all that one is looking for or hoped to find." Roof terms this a

reassessment. Maintains Roof, "Many boomers are rapidly reaching the point where that kind of mid-life exploration sets in."³²

Religious participation among older members of the baby boom generation, reports sociologist David Roozen of Hartford Seminary, was at 43 percent during the early 1980s, up from 34 percent during the early 1970s.³³ Harvard theologian Harvey Cox attributes much of this to the decline of the strong secular ethos of the 1960s, contending that, "current religious thought now acknowledges the value of faith without denying the intellectual element."³⁴

Seven factors in the return of baby boomers to church are listed by Doug Murren in his book The Baby Boomerang:

1. Depression--due to unfulfilled expectations materially. By finding, "peace and freedom in the inner realm" they hope to discover release from their external concerns.
2. Family Values--having children has put baby boomers back in touch with a search for values.
3. New Age Burnout--having gone Out on a Limb with Shirley MacLaine's books, baby boomers are now, "turning to traditional outlets for their faith."
4. Postcrash Conversions--"in the wake of the 1987 stock market crash on Black Monday (October 19), many boomers looked to God to explain their new hardships."
5. Social Activism--baby boomers still want to change the world and are now hoping that, through the church, their lives can still make a difference.
6. Companionship--"divorced and never-married boomers have now tired of serial relationships." They are hoping to find both relational opportunities and insights in the church.

7. Life is Boring--baby boomers are hoping to discover new creativity and awareness in the church, "that will cause life to challenge them anew."³⁵

As a result of these factors baby boomers, though slow to return, are returning to church as never before. Bob Bast concedes that the title of his book published in 1991, The Missing Generation (a book on church outreach to the baby boom generation), may even now be outdated. Bast acknowledges that church growth analyst Lyle Schaller has indicated that the latest research indicates that baby boomers are

pouring into the church. What just in the last months was a trickle is threatening to be a flood. We may be on the threshold of a spiritual revival here in this country. I've called my book The Missing Generation. By the time the book comes out it may no longer be true in view of the fact that baby boomers are coming back to church in huge numbers."³⁶

A Christian Century writer predicts of the baby boomers return that, "The time for the great reversal is at hand" and cites Hartford Seminary sociologists David Roozen and William McKinney's recent study of baby boomers indicating that, "42 per cent of the baby-boom generation is returning to church. . . . Many people between the ages of 18 and 35 who attended church only occasionally before 1970 are now attending regularly. The number of older people attending church has stayed about the same since 1970."³⁷

But the main reason baby boomers are beginning to return to church now is religious education--baby boomers want their children to receive religious instruction. Ken

Sidey notes that there is, of course, a familiar generational pattern at work here. It is not uncommon for high schoolers to drop out of church after graduation and then to drop back in after having children. This is nothing unique. But Sidey does note that baby boomers have been much slower than their parents to return to church. This is due to their delaying of marriage and parenthood. But now a baby boomlet is underway. The year 1985 saw more births than in any other of the previous twenty, "and a growing population of parents is once again looking at the church for the sake of its children."³⁸

Roozen and McKinney report that, "Parents are looking for religious education for their children. With more responsibilities they are seeking stable values that the church provides."³⁹ Agreeing with Gallup, Sidey, Roozen and McKinney, Wes Pippert also maintains that it is children that are bringing the baby boomers back. Pippert sees the 80s as somewhat like the 50s--the relatively stable period which gave birth to the baby boom itself. Now, observes Pippert,

the eighties are seeing a "mini-baby boom" as baby boomers in turn have babies. And children tend to pull their families back to church. Roy Carlisle, West Coast literary agent and father of two, recounts of his San Francisco friends, "The minute they have kids, their relativistic world view collapses. They want to raise children with moral bearings. . . . The church or synagogue is the one place that takes moral values seriously."⁴⁰

Reporter Terry Young notes that, "Many [baby boomers] consider religious training a sort of insurance policy for their Aprica-Gerber's-Pampers investment."⁴¹ Jack Bielin, a musician, says in the article, "I've just turned 40 and like a lot of people, I guess, the '60s were very good to me. But then you wake up from that, and you realize that you're going to have to raise children, and you want them to have some values."⁴²

Summing up this phenomenon, Rodney Clapp observes,

Enthusiastic parents are fond of repeating the Bible verse, "And a little child shall lead them" It is nearly always quoted out of context, but even out of context the verse manages to be true. And so it is currently undebatable that the little children of America are leading their parents right into the nation's churches. A recent issue of The Washingtonian (Washington, D.C.'s city magazine) reports that peak numbers of baby boomers are now maturing, making their own baby boom, and--not so coincidentally--going back to church. In the words of The Washingtonian's writer: "By nearly every measure, church attendance among married adults is tied lock, stock, and barrel to the presence of children in their lives. By this reckoning the return of churchgoing was as predictable as the tides: God didn't die in the early 1970s; the baby boomers simply hadn't had enough children."⁴³

Interviews of baby boomers regarding their return to religion were conducted by Los Angeles Times reporter Ann Japenga. One baby boom new parent conceded how having an infant pushes one to think about God. Thinking of the old saying "there are no atheists in a foxhole," he observed, "I think one could just as well say there are no atheists in the delivery room."⁴⁴

While spiritual training for their children is a key to understanding the return of baby boomers to the churches, Gary McIntosh, editor of Church Growth Network, maintains that many factors should be considered, among them:

Boomers are questioning the meaning of their own lives.

Boomers are nostalgic and wish to relive earlier times.

Boomers are seeking security from the rapid pace of social and technological change.

Boomers are frustrated at making more money than they expected, but living less well than they had planned due to the shrinking American dollar.

Boomers are anxious about society, the environment and materialism.

Boomers are realizing that the answer is not in things but in personal faith.

Boomers are looking for a lifestyle that is more than just constant striving to get higher to make more money.

Boomers are pursuing a new balance by looking deeper into their lives.

Boomers are hunting new and meaningful experiences.

Boomers are coping with aging parents and still-young children.

Boomers are turning 40 and reaching a mid-life malaise.

Boomers are concerned about the moral and religious training of their children.⁴⁵

The main reason for the baby boomers' return though, maintains Kenneth Woodward, religion editor of Newsweek magazine, is their becoming parents, "and the realization that children need a place where they can learn solid values and make friends with peers who share them."⁴⁶ Woodward quotes one young parent as saying, "I wanted my kids to have the knowledge of religion I didn't have. In this crazy

world, any kind of positive influence you can give your children is worth the time."⁴⁷

A young baby boomer mother recalls how, while in college, Sunday mornings "at the sorority house consisted of talking about your dates of Saturday night. People didn't go to church." But then came children. She and her husband then "saw a need to make quality-time for God in their dual career lives." The reason she said is that, "coming to church every Sunday is really important for our little three person family unit."⁴⁸

In a series of interviews I conducted with mainline denominational baby boomer parents, several described their return to church this way:

Greg: To be honest we went back because of our daughter. We wanted her to be exposed to the church because I think it can help her develop a lifestyle which I think is good. It instills values and I think going to church can do that in a way that I couldn't. I think she needs the exposure--I think it will really help her.

Linda: My child was beginning to ask questions that I didn't feel I could answer: who is God and who is Jesus? I could explain it, but not to satisfy her. I looked to the church for somebody that had more training.

Nancy: The kids started asking every Sunday, "When are we going to go to church?" We said, "Yeah, yeah, we're going to go to church," but they started being really persistent about it. It was funny because all this time we had been saying, "Okay, we will," but when we came it felt so right for us. This is what we needed to do. From then on going to church has never been a question.

Holly: Well first I'd say we returned because of our daughter's demands. When she was little she

was always asking us, "Is there a God, or isn't there?" She was just three years old. When she asked if she could go to church we said, "Yes, we would"--which we had never felt we would. When we did return we didn't think we'd be going too long. But if you don't have answers for your child, then how do you know that what you're telling her is right or wrong?

Les: You're on the spot. If you don't know, then who does? We were just going to satisfy her curiosity. We figured a few times in Bible school and she'd stop pestering us, when she learned it wasn't fun at all. This would last a few months and she'd get tired of it when she realized it was just a bunch of, "read the Bible and memorize stuff, cut out the pictures and paste them up." She won't like it. Then we began to like it.

Paul: I had taken the kids several times to church. You know--Christmas, Easter; every once in a while we'd go on Sunday mornings at various churches. But each time I felt a drawing. It felt good. While I thought I was going just for the kids, not for myself, it was really my kids who wanted me to get into church all along.⁴⁹

In saying baby boomers are returning to church though, this must once again be qualified by saying that not all churches are attracting and holding baby boomers. Many churches, particularly those of the mainline denominations, are not experiencing a proportionate influx of younger adults into their memberships. This phenomenon and its impact on the mainline church are discussed in Chapter 3, "The Numerical Decline of the Mainline Church."

NOTES

Chapter 2

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CHAPTER 3

The Numerical Decline of the Mainline Church

Harvard historian William Hutchison maintains that "the future is clear: liberal Protestantism--once the nation's religious establishment--has become a minority movement and must accept sectarian status."¹ Statistics support this charge. "In 1920 seven mainline denominations accounted for 76 percent of American Protestants. Today they have barely half. Since the mid-60s the mainliners have collectively lost more than 4,778,000 members."²

In an article entitled "Those Mainline Blues," Richard N. Ostling, religion editor at Time magazine, observes the following about the mainline numerical decline:

The central fact about mainline Protestantism in the U.S. today is that it is in deep trouble The United Church of Christ (which includes most Congregationalists) has shrunk 20% since 1965, the Presbyterian Church 25%, and the Episcopal Church 28%. As for two related denominations that mushroomed in the 19th century, the United Methodist Church has dropped 18% and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) 43% after a de facto schism. Together, these five groups suffered a net loss of 5.2 million souls during years when the U.S. population rose 47 million.³

Constant H. Jacquet Jr., editor of the Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, 1989, puts it this way:

In 1960 the Presbyterian Church with 4,200,700, and the United Church of Christ with 2,200,000

members reached their highest recorded membership. In 1965 the United Methodist Church with 11,000,000 the Reformed Church in America with 3,900,000 members, the Episcopal Church with 3,400,000, and the Disciples of Christ with 1,900,000, each recorded their highest membership in history. But by 1987 they had lost 25% of their combined membership, going from 22,900,000 in 1965 to 17,600,000 in 1987. a loss of over 5 million members.⁴

And the numerical decline continues.

Denominational leaders, charges Kenneth Woodward, religion editor of Newsweek magazine, are reluctant to acknowledge the problem of declining membership. As evidence of this Woodward notes that "in 1984 the General Conference of the United Methodist Church--once the largest Protestant denomination in the country--pledged itself to a goal of 20 million members by 1992." Woodward observed that far from having met this goal, "Methodists have continued to lose their faithful at the rate of 1000 a week and are now 2 million fewer than they were in 1965."⁵

Woodward quotes Bishop Richark Wilke, chairperson of the United Methodist Church's growth committee, who derides the 20 million goal as "ludicrous." Contends Wilke: "We thought we were just drifting, like a sailboat on a dreamy day. Instead, we are wasting away like a leukemia victim when the blood transfusions no longer work."⁶

Citing a crisis of confidence, Carl Dudley, in his book Where Have All Our People Gone?, observes that "mainline churches have experienced the chill of self-doubt. Just when it seemed as though the religious boom of the '50s

would last forever, somebody changed the rules of the game. The oldest and most prestigious denominations suffered the largest losses."⁷

The declining church membership in the mainline church makes this a unique time in American church history. Louis Weeks, professor of church history at Louisville Theological Seminary, asserts that the depth and longevity of the decline in mainstream Protestantism is unprecedented in its severity because never before has there been a 25 year decline. "The decline is the worst," maintains Weeks, "in the demographic areas that represent the future - in the baby boomers and the children of the baby boomers."⁸

In an article entitled "Coming To Grips With An Aging Church," the Christian Century points out that from 1960 to 1980 birth rates declined rapidly. In addition people 65 and older have increasingly extended life spans. This, says the article, has "changed the face of many religious institutions" in the form of an aging of the mainline churches that increases yearly.⁹ This article cites the 1987 study American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future by Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney (Rutgers University Press) that points out how the proportion of members 50 years and older has dramatically increased in mainline churches:

From 1957 to 1983 the number of 50-and-over Episcopalians increased from 36 to 47 percent; the rise for United Methodists was from 40 to 49;

for Lutherans 36 to 45 percent; for Presbyterians 42 to 49; and for Baptists 33 to 40.¹⁰

Further evidence of the graying of the mainline church can be seen in these following statistics:¹¹

PERCENTAGE OF MEMBERS
(By denomination)

	<u>55 yrs+</u>	<u>13-20 yrs</u>
Disciples of Christ	43.8%	8.5%
Presbyterian USA	41.7%	7.6%
United Methodist	40.9%	11.4%
American Baptist	26.5%	9.6%
Christian Church/Church of Christ	24.8%	12.4%
Church of the Nazarene	22.7%	13.2%
Evang.Lutheran Church in Amer.	20.2%	5.9%
Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod	18.8%	10.2%
Free Methodist	18.5%	14.9%
Christian Reformed	16.8%	11.2%
Non-denominational	15.3%	13.6%
Christian & Missionary Alliance	14.6%	8.8%
Assemblies of God	14.4%	18.0%
Southern Baptist	13.0%	13.1%

What has caused the aging of the mainline churches? It is not just the lower birth rate among mainline churches, although it is true that mainliners have fewer children. In an article on the declining membership in the mainline churches, Kenneth Woodward targets the fact that the children that mainline parents do produce have kept their distance. Breaking with the liberal Protestant pattern of late adolescents, who as grown children tended to abandon the church only to return after having had children of their own, now the majority of mainline baby boomers have, for the most part, drifted away from their mainline faith.¹²

Carl Dudley also contends, "Mainline church members are getting older. The median age creeps up as older members

are not matched by an influx of young blood. The primary (although not the only) cause of membership decline is the churches' inability to attract and hold young members."¹³

While baby boomers are returning to churches, they are not by any means always returning to the denominational churches of their parents. Gary McIntosh, editor of Church Growth Network, maintains that baby boomers are not "blindly returning to the churches of their childhood."¹⁴ Where are they returning? Are they more attracted to the conservative churches? Are baby boomers being won away by the fundamentalist Protestant certainties of the Christian faith? No, maintains Bill Wolfe in an article in The Presbyterian Outlook.

Wolfe, in his article entitled "Mainline Churches Told to Blame Themselves for Membership Declines," maintains that we must not see "the growing fundamentalist churches and their appeal to religious certitude" as responsible for mainline church membership losses. Wolfe lays blame instead on "the failure of denominations to hold on to the distinctive identities that encourage traditional membership loyalty."¹⁵

John Mulder, president of Louisville Seminary, reiterates that "by and large, the Presbyterian Church does not lose members to conservative churches."¹⁶ Instead non-affiliation is pointed to as the basic problem. "People drift away and the people who drift in greatest numbers are

the post-war baby boomers."¹⁷ But many baby boomers are indeed joining conservative churches in record numbers.

Mainline churches are declining at a time when conservative churches are growing, observes Tex Sample author of U.S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches.¹⁸ Conservative churches, Sample explains, draw their memberships "dominantly from the traditional wing of our society"--the cultural right.¹⁹ Mainline churches on the other hand have had to draw from this end of the continuum and from the great middle and cultural left. But, says Sample, "as the baby boomers of both the left and the middle dropped out of the churches in large numbers, those on the cultural right stayed for the most part and continued traditional patterns of church membership and attendance."²⁰ Why?

Many of those Americans on the right side of the culture have reacted against the self fulfillment ethic: the autonomy, the relativism, and the excessive--in their view--personal freedom, not to mention the new morality, the feminist movement, gay/lesbian rights, the attacks on Americanism, abortion, the banning of prayer in public schools, and so on. Many conservative churches--not all--have been fueled by this reaction, producing a highly committed membership, strengthened and reinforced by tradition oriented baby boomers.²¹

The result is that conservative churches have attracted most church-going baby boomers while mainline churches lost their baby boomers--the ones of the cultural left and middle--in high numbers.²²

Of course a cultural shift in values is not the only reason for the mainline decline. Another reason once again is the lower birth rate. Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney note that birth rates in mainline churches dropped below replacement levels in the 1960s.²³ Kenneth Woodward also contends that mainliners are having fewer children. "Indeed," he adds, "the Presbyterians, with a birthrate (1.97) well below the replacement level, seem bent on vanishing like the Shakers."²⁴

Another reason for the mainline decline is the fact that mainline churches no longer seem to be benefitting from what some sociologists call "the circulation of the saints": social climbing Baptist salesmen switching churches to become "chamber of commerce Presbyterians or Episcopal sales executives."²⁵ Roof and McKinney report that social climbing gains by high prestige mainline churches began to dwindle in the 1960s.²⁶ "Instead," maintains Woodward, "they are staying put because their once unglamorous congregations on the other side of the tracks have moved to Main Street."²⁷

Yet another reason for the mainline numerical decline is that pointed out by David Roozen, a researcher at Hartford Seminary: mainline religion's own cultural achievements. "The churches persuaded people to embrace tolerance and inclusiveness . . . but in doing so lost their internal sense of identity. Similarly, liberal

Protestant leaders encouraged antiauthority movements in the 1960s, only to find youths rejecting them as part of the despised Establishment."²⁸

George Gallup reports that "one in three Americans who were raised Methodist no longer identify with the United Methodist Church."²⁹ United Methodist Craig Miller, author of Baby Boom Spirituality, notes that "it is ironic that the churches who were the most supportive of the Civil Rights Movement, the ones who were on the cutting edge of the Feminist Movement, who battled for inclusive language, and were the most active in supporting human rights are now the churches that are hurting the most."³⁰

Richard Mouw of Fuller Theological Seminary, an evangelical, asserts that "the mainline leaning for liberal politics and low cal theology" of the rationalistic sort is no longer fashionable. "We are experiencing a reaction against modernity," says Mouw. "We are getting magic and the occult and the New Age. There's a return to a premodern world view."³¹ Mouw maintains that growing churches are the churches that continue to answer the age old question: "Who am I as a human being before God? How can I face my own death? How can I be forgiven for my very real sins?"³²

In a list of America's fastest growing Protestant congregations, 445 of the 500 were outside the mainline.³³ But the main reason for the decline of mainline churches is the decline of denominational loyalty among baby boomers.

Citing the baby boomers' proclivity for church switching, sociologist Wade Clark Roof observes how baby boomers do a lot of shopping around. For baby boomers there is no substitute for finding out for oneself whether a particular congregation fits your needs, or a particular spiritual seminar will enhance your own self discovery. Baby boomers switch churches frequently, seeking to discover the place where they "feel comfortable." Baby boomers do a lot of church hopping, going from one church to another in search of the style and the ambience that enhance the personal conception of who they are.³⁴

Among baby boomers returning to church, maintains Roof, "participation follows not out of duty or obligation usually, but if it fits their needs."³⁵ They don't convert--they choose. Baby boomers, maintain Roof and William McKinney, "regard society as a crowd of individuals strolling through a lifelong shopping mall of private purchases."³⁶ As a result personal choice becomes the deciding factor in their behavior. They "inspect congregations as if they were restaurants," suggests Woodward, "and leave if they find nothing to their taste."³⁷

Woodward points out that "personal choice is, of course, a hallmark of American Protestantism and one that the baby boomers' parents, who brought the kids to church in the '50s passed on as an article of faith."³⁸ The message these parents passed on to their baby boomer children as

they shopped churches for the best in preaching, programming, and parking was clear: denominational labels do not matter. "It's like gasoline," says evangelical historian George Marsden of Duke University Divinity School. "Once you discover all gasoline is the same, rank loyalty disappears, and any station will do. Only octane matters, and the mainline Protestant churches do not sell high octane religion."³⁹

In confirming the lack of denominational loyalty, David Page contends, "It's like buying a Japanese car instead of one made in America because you're looking for quality. [Baby boomers] will change denominations if they find something they feel is relevant to their lives."⁴⁰

In noting that about half of all baby boomers have attended college and approximately one quarter are college graduates (making them the most educated generation in American history), Bob Bast, author of The Missing Generation asserts that "education continues to affect the way members of this generation act."⁴¹ Baby boomers, he points out, are more sophisticated in their methods, tend to make rational decisions, like making comparisons, recognize and appreciate quality, make independent decisions, and [as a result] are less brand loyal.⁴²

Noted church growth consultant Lyle Schaller observes that

adults born in the '50s and '60s don't carry the institutional loyalty of older generations.

People today expect to make choices about things --about a new TV, an automobile, what they eat, their housing. It's part of the consumer orientation. It is somewhat the same with choosing a church. Parents and grandparents stayed with their denomination, but people from age 40 down to 25 don't have that denominational loyalty. They shop around. Whether it's right or not is not terribly important. It's where we are. The churches have to live where the world is.⁴³

Lyle Schaller observes that in 1965: 80 percent of the Methodist Church members said they had always been Methodists; 85 percent of the Baptists declared they had always been Baptists; 75 percent of all Lutherans had always been Lutherans; 90 percent of the Catholics had always been Catholics; 66 percent of the Presbyterians reported that they had always been Presbyterians; and 60 percent of the Episcopalians had always been of that faith. Schaller further points out that those days are now long gone. Today, only a small percentage would consider themselves permanently affiliated with any particular group or denomination.⁴⁴

Suggesting that baby boomers do not "give two hoots" about denominations, Doug Murren, author of The Baby Boomerang, points to a suspicion of institutions among the baby boom generation which Murren traces back to "the Watergate mess in president Nixon's administration, the Iran-Contra blunder during Reagan's presidency, the scheming Ivan Boeskys of the world of high finance and, of course, the PTL and Jimmy Swaggart ministry scandals."⁴⁵ The

consequence, maintains Murren, is the decline in loyalty to the church as an institution. "Church loyalty for older church attenders is understood. However, church shopping and hopping are not perceived as poor practices in our baby boomer minds."⁴⁶

Because baby boomers have so many options, contends Criag Miller, churches often find it difficult to meet their needs. "If they do not like a particular church they seem to be all too willing to try another one."⁴⁷ Baby boomers, maintains Miller, do not choose a congregation because of denominational labels like Methodist or Presbyterian, but because a particular congregation makes them feel welcome and meets their needs.⁴⁸

While a fair number of baby boomers are returning to churches, they are not, observes Wade Clark Roof, returning in the sense of commitments to institutions--more in the sense of exploring and church hopping. Baby boomers like limited commitments--six week experiences versus lifetime commitments to the church. As one woman said, "give me six weeks at this church then ask me after that; then I'll tell you whether I want another six weeks."⁴⁹

Denominations are less important for baby boomers than for their parents, asserts Bob Bast, with the result that baby boomers are less loyal to denominations, less interested in them, less able to distinguish between them, and really less interested in trying to than their parents.

Some baby boomers, maintains Bast, have an image of mainline churches from their childhood which is structured, rigid, moralistic, and maybe irrelevant. These churches are the ones which they had rejected.⁵⁰

Most baby boomers, continues Bast, have not rejected their faith; they have only rejected their church. When their faith is rekindled or their life calls for church, they want it different and they go to the independent church because it does not have Presbyterian (or whatever) in the name.⁵¹

Typical of some comments on this subject by baby boomers in my congregation are the following regarding denominational loyalty:

Nancy: I don't see that the denomination itself makes a lot of difference. We just feel comfortable and loved it here.

Carol: I probably shouldn't admit it, but I really don't know what really makes Presbyterian different from Lutheran or Methodist. I go for the Bible teaching and that type of thing--not necessarily because my church is Presbyterian. I like it, but I don't know what it is actually.

Paul: The bottom line is you've got to find a place where you can worship and you can be fed, feel good about it, and become a part of it. I joined a Presbyterian church, but I don't feel Presbyterian. I'm a Christian worshipping at a Presbyterian Church, but I could worship just as well (and I do) in different churches.⁵²

But why should mainline churches worry about church growth? Is it not merely playing the numbers game?

In a critique of numerical church growth, Tim Stafford senior writer for Christianity Today, notes that the current

Church Growth Movement's extensive use of the analysis of statistics, careful documentation, and sociological theorizing and asks the question, "What do these have to do with accomplishing the works of God?"⁵³ Stafford maintains that what church growth is all too often about is statistics, documentation, and sociological theory. Stafford observes how church growth analysts all too readily view a church "in much the same way that an engineer views an airplane. The first question is 'does it fly?' The second question is 'how efficiently?'"⁵⁴

Karl Barth though calls us back to the basic question of numerical church growth when he asks, "Is it merely a question, as in other human societies, of . . . drawing large crowds and thus enjoying success?" What God seeks for His church in growing "is the growth and virtue of a power absolutely distinctive to the community of saints."⁵⁵ Barth warns us:

It can never be healthy if the church seeks to grow only or predominantly in [a] horizontal sense, with a view to the greatest possible number of adherents; because mission to the world becomes propaganda on behalf of its own spatial expansion.⁵⁶

Let us examine the spiritual significance of numerical church growth for mainline pastors as they attempt to reach baby boomers with their preaching.

NOTES

Chapter 3

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- ⁷ Carl Dudley, Where Have All Our People Gone? (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979), 45.
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²⁰ Sample, 18.

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³⁴ Roof, lecture.

³⁵ Roof, lecture.

³⁶ Woodward, "A Time to Seek," 52.

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CHAPTER 4

Church Growth Critique

In his book Church Growth Under Fire, Wayne Zunkel provides the following definition of the Church Growth Movement:

That science which investigates the planting, multiplication, function, and health of Christian churches as they relate specifically to the effective implementation of God's commission to "make disciples of all nations." Seeks to combine biblical understanding of the way the church grows with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioral sciences.¹

Kent Hughes, pastor of College Church, Wheaton, Illinois, acknowledges in an article entitled "Feelings of Failure" how he had once uncritically accepted the Church Growth Movement's notion that success in ministry means growth in numbers. The result for him therefore is that success in the ministry had come to mean "growth in attendance; the ultimate was a big growing church."² Hughes acknowledges that the wise use of church growth principles is not in itself inherently wrong.

However, when the refrain they play to is numerical growth, when the persistent motif is numbers, then pragmatism becomes the conductor. The audience inexorably becomes man rather than God, and subtle self-promotion becomes the driving force. Success in the ministry becomes the same as success in the world, and the servant of God evaluates his success like a business man or an athlete or a politician.³

Hughes labels the preoccupation with numerical growth as the wrong goal, further describing it as a subtle seduction. Hughes acknowledges using the world's quantitative standards in evaluating his ministry instead of assessing it from God's point of view: faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Hughes offers four biblical criteria in place of numbers for evaluating success in ministry.

1. To love and worship God. Deuteronomy 6:4,5, "Hear O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Hughes points to this passage as the beginning of success. Anything that we might accomplish apart from love of God has no true spiritual significance.

2. To be a faithful servant. I Corinthians 4:1,2, "Let a man regard us in this manner as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy." Hughes points to faithfulness which proceeds from obedience to God as being success in ministry from God's point of view.

3. To be a hard worker. Hughes does not want to excuse a lack of numerical results in church growth where the cause is sloth. "It is impossible to be a lazy faithful servant."

4. To maintain a proper attitude. A faithful servant is one whose heart attitude is faithful and loving.⁴

Hughes concludes that the sovereignty of God alone is what determines success in numbers and maintains that success can be found even in the context of what the world may view as failure. No matter what the numerical results, pastors and their churches can be successful in God's eyes insofar as they seek to love and worship God with all their hearts, "and to be faithful servants, joyously and vigorously serving the Lord, not our egos."⁵

Responding to the dramatic loss of church membership in mainline churches, Richard Hudnut, author of Church Growth Is Not the Point, contends that "loss of growth in statistics has often meant increase in the gospel." To Hudnut's way of thinking some numerical loss may mean only that "the 'dead wood' is gone. The 'faithful remnant' remains. The church is lean and stripped for action."⁶

Writing of how he has to fight feelings of personal failure whenever he looks at statistics, Wayne Jacobsen observes how--although confident about God's work most of the time and serving a growing church--he came to discover four reasons why numerical success can never in itself be a valid measure of a successful ministry.⁷ "First, the nature of the gospel message tends away from large-scale acclaim." Jacobsen cites Matt. 10:14-18 where Jesus warns his disciples that in some towns where they witness their message would be rejected. Jacobsen notes how the popularity of Jesus after feeding the 5000 waned when "the

bread stopped and truth began," and Jesus began to speak of self-denial and suffering.

"Second, shaping our ministry to suit the masses neglects the nature of this evil age." Jacobsen cites 2 Tim. 4:3 where Paul warns that multitudes will love to have their ears tickled by teachers who say only what they want to hear. Jacobsen offers a simple fact: "good teachers know how to drive away a crowd when they hang around for the wrong reasons." Crowds, maintains Jacobsen, do not always look for life-changing truth, "especially when it confronts uncomfortable areas" of their lives.

"Third, reaching large numbers of people may not always be God's priority and is certainly not synonymous with successful pastoral ministry." Jacobsen cites the effective meaningful ministries of small church pastors and recalls how Paul spent at least 17 years of life-preparing personal growth before God sent him out into Asia.

"Fourth, though we can say with confidence that righteousness leads to fruitfulness, can we say with equal certainty that fruit will always be immediate or external?" Church work all too often comes down to merely numbers and budgets. Jacobsen insists that the church must not give in to a success oriented society that defines success exclusively by desired results.

How should we then measure success? Jacobsen suggests Dietrich Bonhoeffer's measure of success: simple obedience

to the will of God, "not for results, but regardless of them." Ministry, Jacobsen insists, cannot be evaluated by quotas. "That's why ministry can be a frustrating profession for those who seek accomplishments. Obedience is our only motivation, and nothing as trivial as size (or lack of it) can ever measure it."⁸

In his article "Dangers of the Church Growth Movement," Ralph Elliott contends, "I bought every book and I read every manual on the subject. Now I am more concerned than ever because I believe this movement to be one of the worst distortions of the church that American ingenuity born of an outworn capitalist mentality . . . could possibly devise."⁹

Church growth analyst T. Wayne Rieman levels this critique at the Church Growth Movement: "Cancer is growth --wild, unchecked, out of harmony with the whole being. Church growth can be cancerous--out of harmony with the Head, Jesus the Christ."¹⁰ Rieman suggests that the purpose of the church is to be found in the book of Ephesians where "Jesus and His church will unite all, that the church will heal all divisions, bridge the ideological gaps between the nations and . . . heal the broken world."¹¹

The real questions Rieman contends therefore are, "What does Jesus require of us?" and "How can we convert the church?" Rieman offers this harsh critique: "the church is the greatest mission field in the world: . . . unredeemed, unrepentant, unconverted, worldly, smug, classist,

untithing, committed to violence, and fundamentally unconcerned about Jesus' favorite people--the poor!"¹²

Rieman suggests the question for him is: "Should the church grow?" His answer is, "No. I don't want this church to grow! I want it to be redeemed, to be reborn, renewed."¹³

Can a church be healthy and successful in a biblical sense and not experience numerical growth? In asking that question Vernard Eller observes that "a church that doesn't grow may be simply sociologically unhealthy."¹⁴ Eller goes on to insist that sociological criteria do not necessarily yield theological implications. Yet, he maintains, church growth enthusiasts regularly draw theological implications from sociological criteria. Contends Eller, "I grant you that from a sociological perspective an institution needs to grow to be healthy. I'm not sure that this is true from God's perspective."¹⁵

There is a definite shadow side to numerical church growth asserts Ben Johnson, professor of Evangelism and Church Growth at Columbia Theological Seminary (Decatur, Georgia): "church growth can become nothing more than numbers for numbers' sake boiled down to the core."¹⁶ Johnson warns of the manipulative potential for the use of sociological, psychological, and marketing data in targeting people for membership in the church. Johnson sees the Church Growth Movement marketing the church to meet spiritual needs and sees the potential for and the reality

of manipulation in this. "What you do is manipulate people on a mass scale in the same way that you manipulated people in earlier days with threat of hell and judgment."¹⁷

While Johnson does acknowledge that a part of evangelism will deal with data about what people's needs are and what their questions are (for this is to take human beings seriously), on the other hand we have to be sensitive in the way we use that data. There has to be integrity to church growth and the gospel and church growth must speak out of real conviction and caring for people--the deep concern that they will come to know the gospel--and for no other reason.¹⁸

Church growth needs to be less concerned with the numbers of people who respond than it does with the integrity of sharing the gospel and living out the Christian life before people, contends Bob Bast, author of The Missing Generation. "This is not to say that we are not interested in numerical response. It is only to say that we must not measure everything by how many people are coming in. There is more to the gospel than numbers and the danger is that church growth becomes just a numbers game."¹⁹

There is also a danger of personality worship within the church growth movement warns church growth analyst John Perkins. Perkins cites a "cult of personality" that is all too pervasive in church growth thinking. Perkins insists that we need to be showing people how Christianity is the

body of believers not a charismatic individual leader. Perkins encourages pastors to be teaching people how to draw close to God, not to themselves as pastors. He points to the need to teach people to be actively involved as part of corporate worship, part of a fellowship of believers.

Observes Perkins, "I think some of our so called church growth is no more than personality growth. People are going for personalities. Many people have very weak faith, but they feel good being around those personalities and so they go to church to get a good feeling about being close to someone who seems close to God."²⁰

"A very powerful success syndrome is present in the church today," writes Shannon Foster in his book The Growth Crisis In American Churches. Contends Foster:

Those who pastor a church of considerable size or with rapidly increasing membership or that distinguish themselves by some unique form of ministry receive considerable recognition. This recognition may even manifest itself in an unseemly adulation. Substantial pressures are generated to strive for this success as the conventional wisdom of the contemporary church rates that success.²¹

Increasingly, maintains Foster, sensitive pastors and lay people are becoming wary of this self-serving dimension to the pursuit of success which is measured all too often in exclusively numerical terms. On the other hand Foster recognizes that there can be a reverse ego mania which "proudly rejects anything that might be associated with the success syndrome."²² Foster sees in this a danger of over

reaction so that church growth is dismissed altogether. But still there is the legitimate concern, he contends, that numerical church growth lends itself all too easily to inflating one's ego or gaining credit and recognition for oneself in what is intended to be the service of Jesus Christ. Foster labels this as repugnant.²³

There is a distinction between notions of worldly success and spiritual success, maintains Vernon Grounds, President Emeritus of Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, Denver. In LEADERSHIP, Grounds asserts that "Worldly success is judged without reference to God or eternity. Spiritual success is judged by God from the perspective of eternity, without reference to the world's evaluation."²⁴

Those preoccupied with church growth have allowed secular notions of success to impose their standards upon the church, maintains Grounds--standards which are not biblical. The following is Ground's critique of the church growth movement today:

We agree that the right thinking plus the right programming and motivation, plus the right techniques will change any failure into a shining success. We agree with him that faith turns losers into winners. Faith? Well, positive thinking. Faith? Well, confidence in ones own potential. Didn't Jesus assure us that if we seek God's kingdom first everything--everything! --will be added to us? Then why drive a Volkswagon when, as God's successful servant, you ought to be driving a Cadillac? Why shepherd a little flock when, as God's successful servant, you ought to occupy a commanding pulpit and be a magnetic television personality? Why remain

satisfied with a small, but sufficient income when, as God's successful servant you ought to eventually retire to Florida in comfort and security and play golf until you are welcomed into heaven's country club?²⁵

Grounds concedes the sarcasm in his analysis, but refuses to back down, pointing to church growth's bowing before the "bitch goddess of success":

It worships at the shrine of sanctified or unsanctified statistics. We are sinfully concerned about size--the size of sanctuaries, the size of salaries, the size of Sunday schools. We are sinfully preoccupied with statistics about budgets and buildings and busses and baptisms. I repeat: too many of us are worshipping the bitch goddess of success.²⁶

Grounds offers three observations for a clear biblical understanding of success:

1. "God's standards of success differ from the world's." Grounds cites Luke 16:15 in which Jesus affirms that "what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination to God."

2. "The Bible turns values topsy turvy, puts first what men [sic] put last, and last what man [sic] puts first." Grounds cites Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians that the achievements prized by this world which Paul calls gold, silver, and precious stones are dismissed in God's eyes wood, hay, and stubble. Grounds also notes that the writer of Hebrews in the eleventh chapter lists successful people as "the overwhelming majority when he does that turn out to be failures."

3. "God has established certain standards of success." Grounds maintains that His criteria are not always pulpit eloquence, encyclopedic knowledge, or mountain moving faith. Based on I Cor. 13:1-3, God's criterion is Christ-like love. Grounds suggests Matt. 20:25-27 as that which presents the mark of success as being service inspired by Christ-like love and Grounds cites Matt. 25:21 as presenting the third criterion of spiritual success in the faithful use of talents God has given us.²⁷

No wonder that Howard Rice, professor of Ministry at San Francisco Theological Seminary (writing in The Church Growth Crisis in American Churches), asserts: "At the same time that church officials at every level are aware of the declining membership base, there is little interest in the whole subject of church growth, let alone evangelism."²⁸ Rice contends that for mainline churches it almost seems as if spreading the gospel to the world ("especially that part of the world within speaking distance") is unseemly or in poor taste. "With relatively few exceptions, the whole matter of winning persons for Christ is viewed as something for the 'unwashed' sect groups or for those with a particular theological stance and not a matter for the whole church."²⁹

The mainline church has all too often rationalized this failure to evangelize, maintains Rice, by equating membership decline with spiritual faithfulness. Church

growth is viewed with suspicion and, contends Rice, "becomes a scapegoat for all the critical fears that success will somehow spoil the purity of the faith." The result though, observes Rice, is all too human: mainliners remain polite and friendly to outsiders, but essentially "we see ourselves as having our own clientele."³⁰ In other words, if others want to join let them come to us.

In agreeing that God is interested in numbers and God is interested in numerical church growth, Nelson Anan in his book More People: Is Church Growth Worth It? poses the question, "how can you claim to be a New Testament church if you are not growing? The growth that Luke records in Acts was a vital part of early church life."

But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about 5000 (Acts 4:4).

Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number (Acts 5:14).

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

And the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord (Acts 9:31).

The Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord (Acts 11:21).

So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers (Acts 16:5).³¹

Affirming the usefulness of statistics as one measure of church growth, church growth analyst Dean Kelley states:

Though membership statistics are not the only index of social strength, yet they do point to a certain inescapable, irreducible, quantifiable "thereness" in an organization, which has some direct and discernible relation to its existence and success. That is, organizations are made up of members. Whatever its optimum size, an organization that is losing this essential substance is in a distinctly different state from one that is gaining it. . . . Consistent loss of substance is an important change which may have various explanations, but its causes need urgently to be known, lest it prove fatal. Whether such loss is healthy can often be determined by secondary characteristics, but even "healthy" decrease ceases to be so if carried too far. Even Gideon's band had to have three hundred members - he couldn't do it alone.³²

Agreeing that the Church Growth Movement has turned off many mainline leaders, Peter Wagner, a founder of that movement, acknowledges:

Another reason why mainline leaders were turned off to church growth was an innocent, but over enthusiastic arrogance on the part of some church growth advocates. I myself was among them. In the early days we frequently said, "any church can grow--if it wants to grow." And then the corollary: "every church should grow--if your church is not growing you're out of the will of God." Few church growth teachers make such sweeping statements anymore. The critics have been heard. Perspectives have broadened. Attitudes have mellowed.³³

Despite charges against the Church Growth Movement that it thinks exclusively in terms of numerical growth, Wagner responds that there are four kinds of growth of which the Church Growth Movement speak. First is to grow up: to grow up into Christ (Acts 2:42). To mature in the faith. That

is one part of church growth. Second is to grow together: to grow in love and concern for each other. Daily they attended the temple together and broke bread in their homes (Acts 2:46). Third is to grow out: to reach out to all who were in need (Acts 2:45). Fourth is to grow in numbers (Acts 2:49): numbers matter. Numbers mattered to the early church.³⁴

Still the emphasis on numbers gets to be too much. Carl R. Smith, director of the New Ministries Project in Indianapolis, writes in Presbyterian Outlook: "Most of us now see that the faithfulness of the church is not shown either by our crowds or by our income. We all know how many times in history when the church was blessed though it was poor and small and we know times when the church was large, rich--and false."³⁵

A disturbing aspect of the Church Growth Movement has remained the homogeneous unit principle. Defining the homogeneous unit principle, J. Randall Peterson, managing editor of the Evangelical Newsletter, writes:

It is an observable fact that people tend to gather together with people of their own culture (race, economic level, social strata, etc.) Church growth scientists say [therefore] it won't work to merge people of different cultures into the same church, so we shouldn't try it. Others, reading the Bible's strong language about Jew-Gentile relations (all are one in Christ), say that such merging may defy observable facts, but that it is right because God said so.³⁶

Carl Dudley says of the homogeneous principle, "The homogeneous unit does provide a description of the mainline churches, but that description is a judgment upon the church's failure to embrace as Christ's family 'all people who come in the name of the Lord.' The body of Christ is not predetermined by the exterior similarity of social class and cultural background."³⁷

Voicing his opposition to the homogeneous unit principle, Rufus Jones, former director of the Conservative Baptist Home Mission Society, asks, "Is not the church a demonstration of how racial and social prejudice and bigotry can be broken down when people submit themselves to the lordship of Jesus Christ?"³⁸ Responding to the sociological methods of the church growth movement, Jones continues, "Sociology informs us that if we follow the teaching of the Bible, the church will not grow. Our answer should be that we should never put the word of sociologists above the word of God. The Bible, not sociology, is our authority."³⁹

Bob Bast contends that church growth has become a negative term for many because of the impression people have of the homogeneous unit principle. The common perception is that the Church Growth Movement advocates going after people who are like those who are already in our churches (white, middle, or upper-middle class).⁴⁰

This leads to the criticism of one pastor in targeting baby boomers for church growth that a focus on baby boomers

seems to have to do with racial and class distinctions. This pastor describes his concern that "the whole baby boomer business seems to be a white, middle-class enterprise. The question a focus on baby boomers raises for me is what would a Hispanic get out of this, or a Black, or an Asian?"⁴¹

Expressing a serious concern that the mainline church's interest in baby boomers has covert racism attached to it, Grant Hagiya, assistant professor of Religion and Society and the Director of the Urban Ministries Center at the School of Theology at Claremont, asserts:

Whenever I go to a workshop on baby boomers or see the research, it has an evangelistic note. The key is, "How do we get these people into our churches?" It hearkens back to that golden era of the '50s when everybody looked the same, dressed the same, acted the same, and came from the same neighborhoods and represented that socio-economic non-mix. I see a danger in the preoccupation with baby boomers when it has us labelled evangelists. Who are we bringing into our churches? Only white, middle-upper class professionals?⁴²

Focussing on baby boomers as a generation and their relation to the future of the church as an institution may, contends Wade Clark Roof, "tend to create churches which ignore believers of other ages or classes whose needs and agendas do not match their own."⁴³ Roof, in doing research for the Lily Endowment dealing with the question of mainline churches, the baby boom generation, and their relation to the future of the institutional church, acknowledges the limitations of that focus. But he also asserts this

generation's importance because "baby boomers, as a population, are disproportionately few in numbers within mainline churches. Baby boomers as youth, particularly those growing up in the '60s, dropped out of white middle class Protestant churches in higher rates than in any other enclave that we might mention."⁴⁴ Baby boomers therefore, contends Roof, must not be ignored.

In responding to the charge of covert racism in focussing on baby boomers, Robert Paul, a United Methodist and co-author of Reaching for the Baby Boom, maintains that baby boomers are, after all, nothing other than people born in the U.S. between 1946 and 1964. Insists Paul, "That includes all persons born in the U.S. during those years: African American persons, Hispanic persons and Asian persons. To say that there is a covert racism in seeking to minister to and reach a particular generation is, I think, a misunderstanding."⁴⁵

Acknowledging that the majority of baby boomers are Anglos, Craig Miller, a United Methodist and author of Baby Boom Spirituality, concedes it is true that an Asian or Hispanic who has come to America recently and is of the same age group will have a hard time understanding the discussion about baby boomers, but that is not because of race, but because of the experience of the '60s. Miller does not think that the focus on baby boomers is at all racist, but is an acknowledgement that we live in a society that is more

and more fragmented. We still need to recognize and not be afraid to say, contends Miller, that the baby boom generation needs to have ministries pinpointed toward them --and that that is not racist.⁴⁶

Bob Bast counters the covert racism charge contending that anyone concerned about evangelization will have a deep yearning to reach baby boomers. How can we, asks Bast, ignore 77 million people--half of all adults? If, like Jesus, we have compassion for the multitudes who are so often harrassed and helpless (Matt.9:34) we cannot ignore, maintains Bast, the hugh number of people who make up the baby boom generation. The sheer number of them is, in itself, a reason for a specific focus and an intentional plan. Concludes Bast, "To evangelize America, the church must learn how to reach baby boomers."⁴⁷

The mainline focus on baby boomers, continues Bast, merely exists because baby boomers (Anglo, Black, Asian, and Hispanic) are missing from our churches. Bast recalls Luke 15, saying, "Like a shepherd who has lost a sheep, a woman who has lost a coin, a father who has lost a son, we cannot rest until they are found."⁴⁸ Doug Murren, author of The Baby Boomerang, suggests that "the apostle Paul recognized the need to respond to multilayers in the societies he reached. In I Corinthians 9:19-23 Paul writes to the church of Corinth describing his modus operandi:"⁴⁹

Though I am free and belong to no man I make myself a slave to everyone to win as many as

possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law, but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I might share in its blessings.

Why should the church reach out to baby boomers? Chuck Smith Jr., writing in Christian Life magazine, offers this reason: the Great Commission. All of us have a responsibility to help reach this generation as others with the gospel. Baby boomers also will reach the next generation. Asks Smith, "Who will take the gospel to the punk rockers and teenagers of today? . . . Baby boomers can reach out to their younger brothers, sisters, and children in their own way. Probably the later group of boomers will be most active in keeping the message of Christ alive."⁵⁰

Yet Tex Sample, author of U.S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches, sums up the concern over the baby boom generation when he asks what will happen to mainline churches with the average age of their members increasing if there is not some "significant infusion" of the baby boom generation? Asks Sample, "Literally thousands of local churches have memberships with an average above 50. Where will they be in 20 years?"⁵¹

The concern of the mainline denominations to reach baby boomers ought to have to do with American culture itself.

Sample contends that the mainline churches cannot affect a generation with which it has little relationship. "If the church cannot draw to itself a large number of baby boomers, especially those who represent the secularizing edge of our culture and where it is going, how will the church influence and help to shape the society in the 21st century?"⁵²

The next chapter examines the spiritual makeup of the baby boom generation and considers some implications for mainline church pastors in preaching to the baby boom generation.

NOTES

Chapter 4

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⁴⁵ Robert Paul, interview with author, 11 October 1990.

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CHAPTER 5

Baby Boomer Spirituality

Announcing the awakening spiritual interest of the baby boom generation, Ken Sidey observes:

A generation that has long felt abandoned by the church is back on its doorstep, looking in the door. Apprehensive, skeptical, confused, it nonetheless senses something inside that it wants, or needs. Whether the baby boom finds what it's looking for depends on how wide the church is willing to open its doors.¹

But who are they?

In comparing and contrasting the attitudes of baby boomers to previous generations, Carl Dudley, author of Where Have All Our People Gone?, offers the following:

Attitudes of Church Members and Older Adults	Attitudes of Younger Adults and Fewer Church Members
Faith: orthodox doctrine	Faith: personal experience
Belong to church and accept its traditions	Question all authority and doubt institutional promises
Localism:	Cosmopolitanism:
family high priority	individual high priority
larger families	less interested in children
ethnic and community ties	cultural diversity
happier	restless
Emphasis on community moral standards	Emphasis on individual decision about personal life-styles
Economic free enterprise	Advocacy for individual freedoms
Fear of Communism	Independent politics political pluralism
Greater opposition to	Greater acceptance of
premarital sex	premarital sex
extramarital sex	extramarital sex
abortion	abortion
divorce	divorce
homosexuality	homosexuality
pornography	pornography ²

Dudley lists four characteristics of the baby boom generation. The first is personal religious experience. This experience, says Dudley, is "grounded in God, mediated through natural (as opposed to institutional) sources, and perfected in loving relationships." The second is spiritual/mystical faith. This sometimes makes church seem irrelevant and/or hypocritical to baby boomers. Dudley reports one baby boomer observing of Jesus: "Because of him I could never join a church. He is so real and churches are so phony."³

The third is non-institutional sources. The themes of faith for baby boomers, says Dudley, are, "mystical ties with the Creator, human affinity with the land, doubt in established authority, and the quest for quality rather than quantity of life."⁴ The fourth characteristic is a community of love. This community, says Dudley, is based upon both a willing heart and continued satisfaction with the experience of the group. It focuses on personal fulfillment and continued growth. Dudley sees baby boomers as a type of "new believers" who only now are beginning to return to church.⁵ What is new (or unique) about baby boomers' spirituality and belief?

A basic factor in baby boom spirituality is the fundamental issue of individualism versus community. In the syllabus for his class "Culture and Ministry at a Crossroad," professor Ronald C. White, Jr. observes: "At the

heart of many cultural conversations is the fundamental issue of individualism versus community in a changing American culture. Nowhere is this more true than for that generation called the baby boomers."⁶

In a lecture titled "Baby Boomers and the Implications of This Phenomenon for Our Church and Religious Studies," Wade Clark Roof points to the tension between individualism and community as being at the heart of baby boomer spirituality. Roof observes that "individual versus community, social contract versus concern with self fulfillment, the self versus external institutions: these kinds of issues are paramount to [understanding] this generation."⁷ The result is a direct challenge to religious authority. Baby boomers, notes Roof, start with the individual instead of the institution and assume that there are "alternative ways, theologies, and expressions of religion and spirituality" to be found outside established religious communities. Baby boom spirituality values, says Roof, the independent search for and discovery of truth and meaning.⁸

In exploring this theme of individualism versus community Roof contends that baby boomers, while suspicious of institutions, also have a deep hunger to find some expression of community and ritual that relates to their own spiritual lives.⁹ Yet, maintains Roof, baby boomers differ from previous generations in that baby boomers place the

burden on the institution to relate itself to the individual's own spiritual self instead of vice versa. Continues Roof, "We asked a question in our research of all our respondents: 'Does one need to go to church to be religious or spiritual?' Eighty-seven percent of baby boomers surveyed said that one could be a good Christian and not attend any church." Concludes Roof, "Not only are the institutional and the spiritual disconnected, the norms for what constitute a good Christian have, since the 1960's, undergone considerable redefinition."¹⁰

A characteristic of the 1960s, observes Roof, was the rediscovery of the folk tradition in music, foods, and health. Roof sees in the folk tradition one source of the tension between individualism and community and the resulting rejection of institutions.

Folk tradition is a very important theme for the boomer generation. The folk tradition begins with the individual, it emphasizes feeling and self-awareness. It celebrates experience over doctrine, the personal over the institutional, people's religion over official religion, soft-caring images of deity over hard-impersonal images, and the feminine and the androgenous over the masculine.¹¹

Roof observes that for many baby boomers authority is internal. One must pick and choose. Truth and meaning are found within one's own experience, and religion is something essentially experienced not merely joined.¹²

Ben Johnson, professor of Church Growth and Evangelism, Columbia Theological Seminary (Decatur, Georgia), also

points to the tension in baby boom spirituality between the individual and community. Johnson contends that baby boomer spirituality is indeed "privatized and experience centered." For Johnson this means baby boomers display a lack of responsibility toward society; all too many baby boomers "live for 'me' and 'my': my experience, my desires; my wants."¹³

Craig Miller, author of Baby Boomer Spirituality, also sees baby boomers as being essentially isolationist and me-oriented. "'What is this going to do for me?' is probably their biggest question. They are loyal to themselves and they will not be loyal to an institution."¹⁴

This individualism and isolationism, contends Tex Sample, author of U.S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches, is rooted in an ethic of self-fulfillment. "Baby boomers have been the generation most characterized by the ethic of self-fulfillment and they more than any other group can be identified as its primary carriers."¹⁵

Despite their privatism and emphasis on individual spirituality Bob Bast, author of The Missing Generation, also maintains that baby boomers have a hunger for community and a longing for spiritual reality. Observes Bast, "Anyone who spends time listening to baby boomers will probably hear evidence of dissatisfaction, perhaps even of emptiness For all their celebration of freedom and pursuit of

material gain the baby boom generation has awakened to the fact they they have come up empty."¹⁶

Pollster Daniel Yankelovich, like Roof and Bast, contends that despite their individualism, baby boomers still also yearn for community: "A hunger for deeper personal relationships shows up in our research findings as a growing concern [Our] surveys show that 70% of Americans now recognize that while they may have many acquaintances, they have few close friends--and they experience this as a serious void in their lives."¹⁷

Researcher Robert Gribbon has discovered that "the desire for intimacy is a prime factor in bringing baby boomers back to church."¹⁸ In his interviews with baby boomers Gribbon notes the overwhelming emphasis on belonging and indicates that those turning to the church are looking for "friends, for a community of shared value, for support with life tasks, and a personalized, but structured relationship with ultimate reality."¹⁹

These then are the baby boomers--a generation back on the church doorstep looking in the door. Will we open the door wide enough? To do so it might be helpful to acknowledge some general characteristics of the baby boom generation that result from this tension between individualism and community. Jack Sims, president of B.O.O.M.E.R.S. notes the following:

They are open to experience--"Going to church has to make me feel better."

Their Bible teaching stresses practical living--"I don't want to hear about pie in the sky. I've got to pay my bills and stay married."

They place a healthy emphasis on relationships--"I don't like sitting in a pew for an hour and looking at the back of someone's head."

They share their faith by what they say and do--"It's important to me that a person's walk matches their talk."

They have fewer titles and less formality--"Our minister is not called Reverend, Doctor, Father, Pastor, or Brother. His name is Chuck . . . or Mary."

They understand the new family in America--"Our families are more like the Brady Bunch or Kate and Allie, than Ward and June Cleaver."

They recognize the ability of women--"Working in the board room on Monday and the nursery on Sunday won't inspire modern women."

They place an emphasis on worship--"I want to get in touch with the supernatural."

They have a high tolerance for diversity--"Falwellian Fundamentalists are too narrow-minded."

They are action-oriented and have an attitude of expectancy--"The spirit of the Peace Corps is still alive."²⁰

What can we do to reach baby boomers?

Church growth consultant Lyle Schaller lists twenty-one steps to reaching the baby boomers. Among them are vital worship that touches the feelings. A teaching ministry found in a strong church school for both children and adults and a strong weekday program including one or more of the following: a weekday nursery school, Bible study and support groups, athletic teams, youth groups, and recovery workshops.²¹

Schaller has discovered that a strong ministry of music is also a key. Schaller notes that the larger and/or younger the membership of the church, "the more important a broad and varied ministry of music" including two to five different music groups at each worship service.

Transformational leadership is yet another factor. While Schaller observes that a majority of ministers seem willing to focus on caring for people as individuals, fewer accept the role of driving for radical change and new priorities.²²

In addition to these, Schaller has discovered that allocating three to five percent of total expenditures for advertising, a good athletic program, adequate off street parking (one parking space for every two participants in the most heavily attended worship service), quality facilities (especially for the nursery, women's restrooms, adult meeting rooms, and playground), and a Christian day school are among other key steps to reaching baby boomers.²³

The number one factor in reaching baby boomers though, maintains Schaller, is none of these. The number one factor Schaller says is preaching. Asserts Schaller:

In recent years I have asked several thousand new members this question. "Why did you join this church? There are lots of churches around here; why did you pick this one?" Younger adults usually begin their response by praising the preaching, the meaningful content of the sermons, and the communication skills of the preacher. This is especially pronounced among those who (a) left the denomination in which they were reared when they joined this congregation and (b) were born after 1955. By contrast, a majority of those born before 1935 identify their

denominational affiliation as the number one factor in choosing a new church home. It is difficult to overstate the power of good preaching today, and it usually is the number one factor in determining where the baby boomers go to church.²⁴

Schaller is quick to point out a difference between older and younger baby boomers in this survey. Older baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1956, says Schaller, are choosing churches more with an emphasis on children's educational ministries and contemporary worship. Younger baby boomers, born between 1956 and 1964 though, are choosing a church with an emphasis on preaching.²⁵

Whether contemporary worship, children's ministries, or preaching is most important to baby boomers in choosing a church, the data shows that preaching is of great significance. According to a recent survey of baby boomers who have selected a church, the five most cited reasons for choosing a church are the worship service, the pastor, good sermons, feeling accepted, and programs for children. While the worship service is the most cited reason for selecting a congregation, the pastor and good sermons are the next most cited reasons.²⁶

What is this preaching like? Chapter 6 suggests some factors in reaching baby boomers through preaching. These factors, while by no means intended to be viewed as exhaustive, may provide a beginning for other mainline pastors to examine their own preaching in light of the newly awakening spiritual interest of the baby boom generation.

NOTES

Chapter 5

- 1 Sidey, 26.
- 2 Dudley, 37.
- 3 Dudley, 13 - 14.
- 4 Dudley, 15.
- 5 Dudley, 15.
- 6 Ronald C. White, "Culture and Ministry at a Crossroad: Individualism and Community in the 1990's, the Coming into Focus of Ministry and the Baby Boom," course syllabus, CF 730, 28 May - 7 June 1991, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, Calif., 1.
- 7 Roof, lecture.
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- 13 Johnson, interview.
- 14 Miller, interview.
- 15 Sample, 17.
- 16 Bast, The Missing Generation, 72.
- 17 Daniel Yankelovich, New Rules (New York: Random House, 1981), 251, as cited in Bast, The Missing Generation, 70.
- 18 Quoted in Bast, The Missing Generation, 72.
- 19 Quoted in Bast, The Missing Generation, 72.

²⁰ Quoted in Jami Leabow, "The Big Chill Chapel,"
Orange County Register, 8 July 1986, A6.

²¹ Schaller, "Twenty-One Steps," 1.

²² Schaller, "Twenty-One Steps," 1.

²³ Schaller, "Twenty-One Steps," 2.

²⁴ Schaller, "Twenty-One Steps," 2.

²⁵ Schaller, interview.

²⁶ "Why Baby Boomers Return to Church", 16.

CHAPTER 6

Preaching to a New Generation

Michael Williams, director of Preaching Ministries, Section of Worship, United Methodist Board of Discipleship, provides five observations for preaching to baby boomers. Preaching to baby boomers needs to be:

1. more biblical than doctrinal--there needs to be a clear sense of teaching the Bible as we preach.
2. more concrete than abstract--baby boomers want a faith that is practical, that can be applied to their lives immediately.
3. more relational than detached--preachers need to be transparent; they need to allow boomers to come to them and discover who they are.
4. more imaginative than didactic--baby boomers are not interested in hearing a lecture from the pulpit. Remember, more of this generation learned about Christianity from C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien than from Karl Barth and Paul Tillich.
5. more oral than written--reading from a manuscript gets in the way of communication for baby boomers even more than previous generations.¹

Herb Miller, author of The Vital Congregation, suggests that preaching to baby boomers be clearly biblical. "Instead of developing a philosophical point with a biblical illustration," he writes, "the central point of the sermon should grow out of the biblical text itself. . . . Baby boomers respond far more positively to biblical preaching than the generation immediately preceding them."²

A second requirement, contends Bob Bast, author of The Missing Generation, is that sermons be personal. Bast suggests that they be personal in that the humanity as well as the personality of the preacher comes through. Baby boomers value sermons that clearly arise out of the life of the preacher--that there is evidence that the speaker is him or herself, "living and perhaps struggling with the issue being dealt with. Observes Bast, "the sermon is also personal in that it makes a personal appeal that challenges attitudes and feelings and calls for an individual response."³ This personal dimension suggests a conversational style not found in a lecture-oration type approach.

A third requirement for preaching to baby boomers, contends Bast, is that the sermons be practical. "Baby boomers are deeply interested in personal growth and self improvement."⁴ Baby boomers value sermons therefore that have a "how to" focus and relate to the issues of life with which they are dealing. Of equal importance with setting forth the biblical truth and making a personal appeal, maintains Bast, is that that truth be applied to everyday life.

Of all the comments by those who have written on baby boomers and preaching, most numerous are those that emphasize the practical "how to," life-issues dimension of preaching. In emphasizing the practical nature of preaching

that baby boomers value most, Bob Bast suggests how these sermons are life oriented messages that focus on help for living today--"biblical principles for how to deal with the issues of living. Very life oriented; very practical."⁵

Many baby boomers living in corporate, bureaucratic America, asserts sociologist Wade Clark Roof, look to religious institutions with high personal expectations of dealing with life issues. Roof suggests that preaching to baby boomers must be, therefore, a blend of authoritarianism and psychology that has "got to be just right for it to click." Roof maintains it has to be authoritarian on the right issues yet equally psychological and open to self concerns on the right issues.⁶

Above all, baby boomers "don't care about doctrine" observes Craig Miller, a United Methodist and author of Baby Boom Spirituality. Contends Miller: "They care about what difference is this going to make for me tomorrow when I have to deal with my boss with whom I'm very angry." Miller maintains that it is important for preachers to be very practical in what he/she talks about and that he/she rid him/herself of a lot of the abstract use of theology. Baby boomers, asserts Miller, value preaching that is cued into what is happening in our culture. Miller suggests that preachers "take examples out of our culture and show how Christianity comes through and speaks to the particular issues of living."⁷ Ben Johnson, professor of Evangelism

and Church Growth at Columbia Theological Seminary puts it this way: "Focus on the issues with which they're dealing: with the questions that they're asking."⁸

J. Irwin Trotter, professor of Homiletics, School of Theology at Claremont, California, also suspects that baby boomers are interested in the "how to" preaching, i.e. preaching that speaks to "how to make it in the next couple of months in terms of child rearing, in terms of financial investments, in terms of more practical issues."⁹ Preaching that is more related to living in the twentieth century and to how to get through the next week, observes Trotter, "is probably going to be more attractive to baby boomers."¹⁰

An example of "how to" life issue preaching is offered by Robert Paul, of the Section on Christian Education, the General Board of Discipleship, the United Methodist Church, in a sermon Paul heard delivered by a pastor of a church that is made up of 90 percent baby boomers. This "how to" sermon was taken from the book of Acts, the story of Lydia. The three points of the sermon were built around the tension between family and work. The preacher's first point explained how Lydia was a businesswoman so Lydia felt that tension. The preacher's second point addressed the need to set priorities in our lives based upon the values found in the gospel and using our Christian faith as the grounding of those values. The preacher's third point focused on the question, "Can you be a Christian in the workplace?"

Observes Paul, "These are issues that boomers struggle with. The pastor did a first-rate job of preaching to baby boomers in that he knew his audience and spoke to the struggles they face."¹¹

A mainline pastor who is preaching to a growing number of baby boomers points to the example of Southern California area Evangelical Free Church pastor Chuck Swindoll. Observes this pastor, "All Swindoll talks about is telling people how to live life Sunday to Sunday. He's teaching them how to live life and in that he weaves a lot of theology, but a lot of it's just, 'Here's how to get to next Sunday and see me back here.'"

This mainline pastor suggests taking a look at where people are in their lives and addressing those issues: "How is God going to help me through this week--the decisions of life, the transitions of life. Financial crises, a person's marriage breaking up, losing loved ones. How do I get beyond them? I try to identify what I hear in people's lives and speak to that."¹²

The overriding message of those who have studied baby boomers and preaching is to preach practical messages based on scripture that focus on the challenges that baby boomers are facing. Baby boomers' lives, it seems, are so complex and packed with busyness that, in the words of one pastor increasingly seeking to adapt his preaching to baby boomers "they just don't know which end is up anymore. They've got

problems with their marriages and their children. Unless preaching suggests how scripture applies to dealing with those problems, preaching is missing the boat for them. Baby boomers want something for their lives out there during the week. They want something they can get hold of."¹³

Doug Murren, author of The Baby Boomerang, observes that he makes a practical life application the highlight of each of his messages.¹⁴ Murren offers seven sermon suggestions to attract baby boomers which include: familiarizing yourself with the "how to" genre in books; inviting members to make a list of their concerns; reading news weeklies regularly to keep up on the issues and trends of the day; giving every message a practical aim; devising practical "how to" sermon titles; and using personal illustrations.¹⁵ Murren says he always asks himself the question, "Am I targetting my preaching to the challenges baby boomers face?"¹⁶

Suggests one pastor preaching to a growing number of baby boomers, "If it's not real they don't have time for it. Baby boomers do not have time for a gospel that doesn't make sense. I think they really want God--they want to experience God in their lives, but they don't have time for something that doesn't work; they don't have time for theory. I think they're more practical."¹⁷

Not that preaching to baby boomers in all its practicality is meant to be a mechanistic approach. That is

why Bob Bast maintains it needs to be personal as well.¹⁸ Craig Miller also asserts that preaching needs to be as personal as you can make it. "Make yourself real to people. Yes, you went to seminary; yes, you've got a doctorate, but baby boomers just want you to be real to them in terms of who you are as a person."¹⁹ Yet another pastor, aware of the needs of the baby boomers in his congregation, put it this way: "Baby boomers want the preacher to be transparent. They want the preacher to say, 'Here's what I'm struggling with. Here's what I'm going through and here's how it applies to scripture. This is what the scripture has to say about how we should live.'"²⁰

It all comes down to the fact that, as Ben Johnson contends, "baby boomers want answers. They are tired of ambiguity; they are eaten up with it and it's scary."²¹ As a result many baby boomers have embraced a more experiential faith than previous generations. Observes Trotter, "The baby boomers are experientially oriented. Their music is experiential. They are interested in mysticism. They are interested in experiencing God more than they are talking about God and explaining God. I think this is one reason that Pentecostal churches, where the emphasis is on experience, appeal to large numbers of baby boomers." But most of all maintains Trotter, "the important thing to baby boomers is answering the question, 'how does this relate to me?'"²²

Church growth analyst Lyle Schaller sums it up when he says that the kind of preaching that seems to reach baby boomers is, "how-to, motivational preaching." Schaller suggests that the sermons that reach this generation take a text in detail and answer the questions, "What does this mean to me?" and, "How does this speak to me?"²³ As a result, Trotter suggests some changes that may need to be made in mainline preaching to baby boomers.

I think by far the widest method used by preachers in mainline denominations has been didactic or teaching lectures; explanations of the faith. Particularly mainline preaching employs a kind of apologetic of explaining what the Apostles' Creed means for today. Truth for this [baby boom] generation though seems to be more immediate and less historical. Baby boomers, I think, are simply not impressed with history.

I remember back in the 60s somebody writing about the young people of that time saying that they were a generation born without navels, that is they have no connection with the past and were reinventing the world for themselves. We preachers who come from a more mainline historical sense I think don't realize there's been a shift in the mentality of this generation.

Our whole interpretation of scripture and of the Bible has been based on historical analysis. Mainline preaching tends to be immersed in the problems that hit us from that historical sense. But I don't think that means as much to this generation. I think that preaching that is more related to living in the 20th century is probably going to be more attractive to this generation - not the historical, intellectual type preaching, but the "how do you get through the next week" type preaching.

Concludes Trotter:

It's not the rabbi model that we ought to be following. It's more, in fact, the priestly

model. That sounds contradictory here, but it is more the model of being the spiritual representative and guide, the spiritual friend rather than the rabbi-teacher and professor that seems to be what those in the baby boom generation are looking for.²⁴

Who in mainline churches is preaching to a growing number of baby boomers and how do they preach? The next four chapters present commentary derived from interviews with four greater Los Angeles area mainline denominational pastors (Lutheran, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Methodist) recognized by their denominational leaders as being pastors who are preaching to growing numbers of baby boomers in their congregations. Gary Collins, rector of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in San Pedro, has seen 170 new members join his church in only 18 months--the majority of them baby boomers. Bob Morley, pastor of Newport Center United Methodist Church in Corona Del Mar, observes that almost all of the new members who have joined his church since his arrival have been baby boomers, and that half of his growing congregaton is now made up of baby boomers.

Rick Nelson, pastor of Cross and Crown Lutheran Church in Rancho Cucamonga, leads a rapidly growing church which is 70 percent baby boomers. Chuck Shields, pastor of Brentwood Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles, reports that of the 90 people to join his church in the last year, 85 are under 40 and most are in their 30s.

The four chapters which follow offer highlights of these mainline denominational pastors' thinking on preaching

to baby boomers. In so doing, the chapters include samples of their sermons to show their ideas in action and as models for other pastors to preach more effectively to baby boomers in their own churches. While these four pastors are all preaching to a majority of baby boomers each, of course, has his own individual approach to preaching. For example Gary Collins emphasizes the importance of story in preaching to baby boomers. Collins is fascinated with the idea that, for Christians, the gospel story is the story of our lives. We live it out over and over. "There's an old saying that everything that has happened in Christ's life will be repeated in our own. The story that we're living out in our own lives is a story that we're very familiar with from having read the gospels: it's the story of Christ's life.²⁵ But Collins contends that baby boomers have not always made the connection between the gospel story and their own lives and as a result are floundering about without a sense of guidance and direction.

Bob Morley highlights the influence that commercial television has on communicating with the baby boom generation. Morley observes that the average commercial on television changes frames every four seconds--sometimes faster--and that some of the jumps are totally irrational. But baby boomers follow along. "Baby boomers are used to shifting all over the place and taking information in, so my sermons can do that too. I'll tell a story in the first part

of the sermon and not make the application until the end of my sermon. I don't say to them, 'I'll come back to this story later.' They don't want me to. They expect that it will become apparent later how the story fits. If it doesn't they let me know!²⁶ The media, contends Morley, have taught people to do that.

Rick Nelson underscores the personal impact that preaching ought to include in communicating with baby boomers. Nelson contends that baby boomers want to hear from someone who is excited about what they are saying. "I'm still very excited by the gospel and what it has to say about the way I live, the way I think about myself, and the way I think about the world in which I live. I want to let them pick up on my excitement."²⁷ A lot of what Nelson says therefore comes from the heart. Baby boomers, maintains Nelson, appreciate the difference.

Chuck Shields underscores the compelling need to communicate grace to baby boomers. "Grace has been for me the most powerful shaping force in my whole ministry and that's what I want to come through to baby boomers in my preaching."²⁸ Shields explains how this comes from his experience of divorce and discovering the grace of God that accepts him for who he is--not for what he does or does not do right. For Shields growing up with a conservative Christian background, divorce did not exist as an option for the Christian. But through therapy and the church,

maintains Shields, he discovered that he is very much loved by God.

One thing, of course, that all four preachers share in common is that none of them intentionally thinks of preaching only to baby boomers in the preparation and delivery of their sermons. They are first of all preachers of the gospel which means communicating the good news to every generation--old and young alike. The preaching of the gospel transcends all considerations of age and eras. But these four preachers are all aware of the special challenge they, as mainline preachers, face in communicating to what is still the missing generation in mainline churches.

Though each of these four preachers has his own individual approach to preaching and all preach the Gospel to every generation, they do though share three observations in common in their commentary which serve to shape my thesis: preaching that most effectively communicates to baby boomers is biblical, personal, and practical. This project has identified these three characteristics based on interviews with these four mainline pastors.

Prior to this project, both Michael Williams and Bob Bast identified these characteristics as most effective in preaching to baby boomers as well. Yet this project not only independently confirms their findings, but substantiates them based on research and presents how these

three preaching characteristics may most effectively be used in preaching situations.

This project suggests that biblical preaching is most effective with baby boomers when it introduces and explains characters, background, and doctrines in contemporary terms. This project suggests that personal preaching is most effective with baby boomers when it emphasizes how the story of the gospel can be seen as the story of our lives. And this project suggests that practical preaching is most effective with baby boomers when intrinsic to its "how to," life-oriented focus is the underlying "how to" of how to make meaning out of a disillusioning and confusing world.

Chuck Shields' comment on the importance of the biblical text in preaching is representative of these four preachers. Observes Shields:

I take the Bible very seriously. I put a lot of time into Bible study and preparation. I have a routine. The first thing I do is read the scripture. I try to live inside the story. When a word triggers a response in me I write it down. Maybe a word will trigger a memory of a person or an experience. I'll write it down. I'll write down a beginning outline then I'll lay the outline down on the floor, study the scripture, and for 30 or 40 minutes just meditate and basically say, "Lord, what is the word that needs to be heard from this today?" I don't hear voices; I don't know what happens, but it's only after then that I can begin to say, "Here's the gospel; here's what's good news in it." This process takes me through Friday morning. By noon, regardless of what kind of mood I was in, I usually find myself laughing, joking and smiling because I find scripture to be very hopeful.²⁹

Bob Morley provides a helpful observation though, noting that even though baby boomers respond positively to biblical preaching they tend to be biblically illiterate.

Maintains Morley:

With baby boomers you can't assume they know anything about the Bible. I hate to say that, but it's true. Oh, I have people who've been Methodists over 40 years and they don't know the Bible either, but that's not typical of their generation. When I introduce baby boomers to something in the Bible more often than not they're wide-eyed. That's because they've never encountered it before. So I make sure when I read the scripture that I explain its background and discuss what the scripture means. When I make a reference to a person--to Moses, Elijah, or anyone else--I simply do not assume that they recognize who they are. I always explain who I'm talking about.³⁰

As my thesis also proposes, preaching to baby boomers needs to be personal. The personality of the preacher must come through. Gary Collins offers this insight, representative of all four preachers, into the importance of personalizing the text. Inasmuch as baby boomers welcome sermons that challenge their attitudes and feelings Collins concludes:

The old didactic, pedagogical or rhetorical style of preaching is shot out the window. As I view the stories of Jesus I am the prodigal who has looked for meaning and joy in all the wrong places, come to his senses, and is heading home. I am the man beaten and left for dead on the side of the road, who experiences God's love through the compassion of an outcast--the Samaritan. I am the one who has experienced death, yet hears the voice: "Lazarus, come out." I am the woman at the well who longs for living waters.³¹

The value baby boomers place on personalizing the message suggests to Bob Morley an increased emphasis on personal sermon illustrations as well. Morley uses a lot of personal stories thinking that when you claim your own story it gives other people the right to claim their story. Morley therefore uses his story for illustrations: "Average kid who grew up in Kansas on a farm; my parents didn't beat me; they weren't alcoholics. I didn't have any big crises in my life, but God still comes to me. Give people permission to look at their lives and how God is speaking to them."³²

Finally, the thesis of this project proposes that the preaching which most effectively communicates to baby boomers is practical as well. Rick Nelson strikes a note common to all four mainline preachers when he maintains that the question of meaning underlies the baby boomers' desire for "how to," practical preaching. What Nelson asserts is that the essential "how to" for baby boomers is how to make meaning out of a disillusioning and confusing world.

Observes Nelson:

I think the one big booming question for baby boomers is the meaning question. What does it all mean? Is there any meaning to what I'm doing every day or is it all a waste? Without an answer the result is hopelessness and depression; meaninglessness. I know baby boomers want to hear how to get their marriage fixed, how to get their business fixed, how to get their spirituality put together, how to pray. But when the stuff hits the fan, mainly what they're looking for is meaning. In some ways it's a

search for something that's missing. Something in my life, or in our marriage, or in our family is missing and they're asking what is it? They want to find out more about God. They want to ask what God has in store for them. How is that going to affect the way that I live?³³

Chuck Shields also believes baby boomers are yearning for meaning. Contends Shields, "Purpose is real strong with the people I see coming here. They are people who are willing to do something that brings more meaning into their lives. The big question is, "What's it all about? What gives me worth? What's really important in life?"³⁴ Therefore a dimension of "how to," practical preaching is the need to communicate the significance of meaning for everyday living. Let us now examine the commentary of these four mainline preachers edited from interviews on how to reach baby boomers through preaching.

NOTES

Chapter 6

- ¹ Cited by Paul, interview.
- ² Herb Miller, The Vital Congregation (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 38, as cited in Bast, The Missing Generation, 156.
- ³ Bast, The Missing Generation, 157.
- ⁴ Bast, The Missing Generation, 157.
- ⁵ Bast, interview.
- ⁶ Roof, lecture.
- ⁷ Miller, interview.
- ⁸ Johnson, interview.
- ⁹ J. Irwin Trotter, interview with author, 19 July 1990.
- ¹⁰ Trotter, interview.
- ¹¹ Paul, interview.
- ¹² Gary Watkins, interview with author, 26 July 1990.
- ¹³ David Nicholas, interview with author, 18 July 1990.
- ¹⁴ Murren, 102.
- ¹⁵ Murren, 103.
- ¹⁶ Murren, 103.
- ¹⁷ Watkins, interview.
- ¹⁸ Bast, interview.
- ¹⁹ Miller, interview.
- ²⁰ Nicholas, interview.

- 21 Johnson, interview.
- 22 Trotter, interview.
- 23 Schaller, interview.
- 24 Trotter, interview.
- 25 Gary Collins, interview with author, 26 September
1990.
- 26 Bob Morley, interview with author, 27 November
1990.
- 27 Rick Nelson, interview with author, 9 October 1990.
- 28 Chuck Shields, interview with author, 7 November
1990.
- 29 Shields, interview.
- 30 Morley, interview.
- 31 Collins, interview.
- 32 Morley, interview.
- 33 Nelson, interview.
- 34 Shields, interview.

CHAPTER 7

Interview and Sermons: Gary Collins
Rector, St. Peter's Episcopal Church,
San Pedro, Calif.

Interview

I'm fascinated with the idea that the gospel story is our story. We're living it out over and over again in our own lives. But we baby boomers haven't made the connection between the story and our own lives so we're floundering about without a sense of guidance and direction. Finally it begins to dawn on us: the story that we're living out in our own lives is a story that we're very familiar with from having read the gospels: it's the story of Christ's life.

There's an old saying that everything that has happened in Christ's life will be repeated in our own. In the end that story becomes something we find ourselves actually living rather than merely hearing. Yet the story is not so much something that we live, as something that lives us. The simple fact is that the story of Jesus is our own story. It's the means by which we can go through life with meaning and hope.

This view of the stories of Jesus therefore opens a whole new way for us to hear the scriptures. As I say I am the prodigal who has looked for meaning and joy in all the wrong places, come to his senses, and is heading home. I am

the man beaten and left for dead on the road who experiences God's love through the compassion of an outcast Samaritan. I am the one who has experienced death yet hears the voice, "Lazarus come out!" I am the woman at the well who longs for living waters.

"Home" is both a metaphor for our longings that will never be satisfied, and the promise of our being truly at home within ourselves and God. It's the sense that knowing the destination, and feeling good about the destination frees me up to be more fully present in the moment. What I'm on is a journey home. I'm returning home. And I've got a lot of little side trips and day trips. The whole concept of journeying home has real meaning for baby boomers.

This is therefore primal baby boomer stuff. Not that I ever think of that when I'm writing it. I don't intentionally sit down when I write my sermons and think, "now what am I going to say to the baby boomers here?" That's not something that occurs to me. First of all, as a person who is a baby boomer myself, I am speaking from my own experience and I will tend therefore to draw illustrations and examples from my experience as a baby boomer. Obviously I also include other illustrations that will speak to the people that are in other phases of their lives, but being a baby boomer myself and having gone through a searching process, I'm able to make sense of the gospel story in a way that has helped me return home.

The old didactic, pedagogical, or rhetorical style of teaching (the whole Socratic idea today) is shot out the window. What baby boomers want to do is hit the page down key and get the answer. I think that's affecting the whole way they build their expectations in life. For instance when you go on a ride at Disneyland, you go and stand in a line for two hours (I'm thinking of the line for Star Tours). You've waited for two hours. You now step inside this vehicle, the doors are closed, you never move in reality more than four feet in any direction. You do not contribute to anything that happens--all you do is respond. The response is essentially the emotional, physical response of the feelings you have as you travel across the galaxy without moving four feet. That's the way baby boomers are. They want the same thrill that they get on Star Tours and they don't want to have to move more than four feet. Hard questions and tough decisions have to be reduced to the consistency of cream of wheat.

We need to experience the joyful freedom of being fully alive and fully present in the story-drama of our lives. Most of us baby boomers seem so fearful and confused. Douglass Adams wrote a sci fi trilogy called Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. In The Restaurant at the End of the Universe there's a great scene where this guy takes a space ship to a restaurant literally at the end of space and time. It has a huge paned glass window that all the tables are up

against and now it's literally the moment in time when the galaxy explodes.

There's a countdown like New Year's Eve and this guy who's experiencing this for the first time is going nuts. He feels he's about to die! The universe begins to explode and he can feel the shock waves and the heat as it emanates from the explosion of the universe, but in the last instant as it explodes he's taken away from it and he goes back in time. So he's been able to experience his death without actually being destroyed by it. Now that's a metaphor for the understanding of death and resurrection in our own lives. We can go right up to it, but unlike the people who've been on that trip before, who are just having a blast partying, blowing whistles, and enjoying watching the universe explode, we can't figure out why because we have not caught on to the story yet.

The story is that, as a Christian, you can move right up to death then back off from it. You can experience death and allow the pain to be real and not run from it. To me that is just a wonderful example of what understanding the story of death and resurrection can mean to us in terms of being able to trust in the story. That is, I know the story, that after death and pain resurrection follows. I'll be able to learn, change, and be transformed by my death rather than just be fearful of it.

Mary Durlack wrote a book called The Rock and the Sand about the pioneering of Australia. The people of the dream are the aborigines who watched the people of the clock (the Europeans), "come out of the sea and strike their flagstaff firmly on the sand." We baby boomers are people of the clock and find it difficult to sing any more. Our capacity to dream left us when we left the garden, although the memory remains. We need to get in touch with the dominant myths of our culture; of our religion. The more we can hear them rather than just think about them, the more we can experience them rather than just philosophize about them (Joseph Campbell speaks eloquently about this) the more they will have the ability to provide a chord of harmony in our lives.

I think the more you talk about journey in your preaching to baby boomers the more they will become familiar with the idea that the destination isn't as important as the journey. I think often that journey is a delightful, welcomed alternative for baby boomers to their perception of the rest of life. Life is almost an extension of the way it was for them in school where they always had a test, there always were finals to go through, and then once that was over they heaved a sigh of relief then waited for the next final. It was this never ending set of steps that they had to get through.

Today I think many baby boomers believe the first step is the chic apartment, then the fancy car, then the house, then the two cars, then When are you going to stop, slow down, and recognize where you're going? Instead of a car and a house (which is only one sort of journey, one story that increasingly becomes dissatisfying) there's an alternative story, a retelling of the gospel in a way that provides them with another way of approaching life, a way that releases them from a sense of constant wandering. You can just physically see them change. Their countenance changes. The release takes place.

Sermons

"I Am the Prodigal" Luke 15:11-32

The Christian faith came as the result of the collision of two passions: God's Passion for us and our passion for God. Holy Week is where we hear the story of this Passion recounted from God's Love letters, the Scriptures. In spite of the fact that it is the same old story, it bears repeating over and over again. In the end, the story becomes something we find ourselves actually living rather than merely hearing. Put differently, the story is not so much something that we live as something that lives us. The story of Christ's death and Resurrection is a great gift to those who allow it to connect with the depths of their own aching. The simple fact is that the Story of Jesus is also our story. It is the means by which we can go through life with meaning and hope.

This view of the stories of Jesus open a whole new way for us to hear the Scriptures. I am the Prodigal who has looked for meaning and joy in all the wrong places, come to his senses, and is heading home. I am the man beaten and left for dead on the side of the road, who experiences God's love through the compassion of an outcast - the Samaritan. I am the one who has experienced death, yet hears the voice: "Lazarus, come out." I am the woman at the well who longs for living waters.

We are here this morning to prepare to hear the story of the Great Passion: God's longing for us and our longing for God. The stories are maps for the journey home. The discipline of Lent is a time for stretching ourselves. Its disciplines are for the sake of our learning the Love Story over again, so that it becomes second nature to us. Christian discipleship places us in a situation of vulnerability by bringing us to the end of our rope. Its purpose is to show that, in the end, our efforts don't work. From time to time I need to be made to feel the extent of my helplessness, so that I can say, with complete candor, "I can't cope. This is really beyond me." It is at that moment of admission that something new and good begins to happen to me. I begin to live from a center other than my self-protecting, manipulative ego. I begin to move in a new direction. This is where we begin the journey home.

We live in an age when everything has to be palatable and easily digestible. Hard questions and tough decisions have to be reduced to the consistency of cream of wheat. We have neither the stomach nor the teeth for solid food.

Let's begin with a question. Do you really know how to enjoy the world? Do you know how to enjoy yourself? One of the greatest parables in the New Testament has to do with the search for enjoyment and fulfillment (Luke 15:11-32). The Prodigal Son thought he knew what joy was. He had to wander far away from "home" (his true joy) to find his heart's desire. The journey home for the festivities takes us through miles of alien territory. Literature abounds with figures searching for home, for heaven. Dante goes to hell to find heaven. Faust sells his soul. Milton's Adam and Eve lose paradise. Wandering off, far from our true selves, is, paradoxically, the way back to who we truly are. In order to find our way back we have to be willing to be actors in the drama of our homecoming. The difference between us and a real actor is that we are playing ourselves, or rather, we are searching for our true selves so that we may play our part more and more fully.

The question is, do you know your role, the part you will play in your own drama of homecoming? Are you really in it? The issue is complicated by the fact that many of us feel trapped in playing a part in a drama in which other people have control over the casting. We find ourselves acting out someone else's idea of what our role should be. When we settle for this, the drama becomes a ghastly repetitive cycle of happiness, anxiety, and despair. We have to be very careful about not accepting our role from anyone less than God. God is the only one who knows our part, and while our unique role may involve the playing out of tragic elements, there is glory in it and its end is joy.

Douglass Adams wrote a trilogy called The Hitchhikers Guide to the Universe. In The Restaurant at the End of the Universe, we learn of the most popular cruise of all time.

It shuttles people back and forth to a restaurant located at the end of the space and time continuum, literally a table at the end of history. The hitchhiker purchases a ticket, journeys through time and space and finds himself seated at a table with a giant window in front of him. He, and the others at the restaurant, are going to watch the end of history take place, the theoretical explosion of the universe. There's a countdown to the actual moment and they watch the flash of light; feel its heat; feel the explosion, follow its color; feel the excitement, and then are quickly brought back in time so that they are not destroyed in the violence of an exploding universe.

Those who have made this journey many times learn to experience the joyful freedom of being fully alive and fully present. They know how it ends. This is why it is so important for us to own the story of God's Passion. The more we embrace the fixed form of the Drama of Death and Resurrection, the more we are able not only to survive it, but grow through it.

Mary Durlack begins her book about the pioneering of Australia (The Rock and the Sand) with these words: "The people of the dream watched the people of the clock come out of the sea and strike their flagstaff firmly on the sand." The clock people triumphed over the dream people. The conquered dream people of the world have much to teach us about our journey home by telling familiar stories and singing well known tunes. In the common place rhythms of our lives there lies new hope and new possibilities.

Think for a moment of the idea of theme and variation in music. Milan Kundera, in his novel The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, reflects on the fact that Beethoven, toward the end of his life, became fascinated with composing variations on a given theme as a means of exploring infinite musical possibilities. There are two infinities: The infinity of space and time, and "the second infinity" of inward variation. The first infinity is, of course impenetrable. We cannot fill space, and time is running out. But, just as there is freedom in fixed poetic forms, so there are infinite possibilities in playing variations on the same old tune. Beethoven concentrated on plumbing the depths of the same sixteen measures.

What Beethoven discovered in his work with variations we find when we enter the Passion Story. Our lives are given "another space, another direction." The sixteen or so measures that make up our lives are suddenly fraught with significance when we make the journey into the second infinity. And this journey is no less adventurous than the trip to the restaurant at the end of the universe.

The stories of Holy Week and Easter are opportunities to go into the "inards" of things, to understand afresh and to find in them new space and new directions. This journey into the second infinity, the immeasurable variations of our

own inner lives, requires our being able to remember the basic themes of our own lives without the benefit of editorial revisions. God wants and needs all of me, including the painful events of my life, in the journey home.

To people unwilling or unable to begin the journey home (although we are all making the same journey whether we are aware of it or not), all this is fanciful talk. But those who are willing to enter the Passion Story find themselves in a place of transition between the old and the new.

Holy Week creates a space for us to dare a little in the direction of Passion. We begin by daring to hope for a homecoming. We already know scraps of the tune. It is now a matter of listening to the same old story and catching more and more of it.

As we have seen, there is one scene in the Passion Play that focuses our attention on homecoming. The Prodigal comes to himself—that is, he repents. The father's love frees him to forgive himself so that he may eat and be made into someone new. The narrative of the Prodigal Son is part of the same old story that carries within it the promise of genuine newness and variation. Saint Paul affirms, "If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."

"Learning to Live; Learning to Die"
2 Kings 2:1-12

What is it that draws you to Jesus? When I was not more than five years old my Father took me to our regular Wednesday Lenten service. The rector was preaching about the human side of Jesus. He spoke of the missing years in Jesus' life. The time between his birth and his baptism--the years we want to know more about, but have very little to go on. At one point in the rector's sermon he imagined Jesus as a small boy, perhaps also five years old, at night, alone in his bed. There was a storm outside and the sky lit up with lightning and the air was filled with the clapping of thunder. He was sure that Jesus was frightened by these things. It's a part of being human. It's a part of being five years old.

At that moment the lightning flashed outside our church and I learned an important lesson. It is when He is most like us that He is most powerful. What draws us to Jesus is His radical identification with us. He is weak and vulnerable as we are. And when we connect with our greatest weakness, we are suddenly very close to the heart of things. It is in our times of weakness and vulnerability that God teaches us about mercy.

Alice Walker's heroine in The Color Purple knew something of the infinite mercy of God when she discovered the solidarity of all things: "It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself My first step from the old white man [God] was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day, when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not seperate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed."

The insight that if she cut a tree her arm would bleed is a turning toward home. Her first step back to the old white man, God began with a tree, then air, then birds, then other people. Our road leads to a bleeding tree. The cross is the place where all things meet, where you can't understand yourself apart from everyone and everything else.

If we are to approach the tree that bleeds we have to identify with humanity, see other people, the way that Jesus identifies with us. I want to limit those with whom I will be in relationship. I tend to favor Episcopalians. I tend to favor those who think like me or those with whom I share common experience. I shy away from people who are different from me. Holy Week reminds me that Jesus did not shy away, and I must not.

In Holy Week my annual quarrel with God comes to a head in the biblical images of the story. It looks as if, yet again, God is going to make a fool of Himself by betraying Himself into our hands. Just what kind of God is manifested in the drama of Holy Week anyway? I am inflicted by my Judas complex. I feel as if I might, at any moment, be betrayed. Have you never thought of Judas in this way? Not just Judas the Betrayer, but Judas the one who was afraid to be betrayed? The betrayal of Jesus by Judas had its roots in resentment. I look at the world, I look at my country, I look at myself. There rises up in me a voice that says, "Surely God could do better than this?" Somewhere deep inside of me there comes a bitter cry: "life isn't supposed to be like this." I feel as if I might be made a fool of. Better anticipate the worst and betray rather than risk being betrayed.

Holy Week is a time when I am given the opportunity to reflect on how my past infects and affects my present. There are memories that refuse to surface so deeply have I buried them. I catch a glimpse of them out of the corner of my eye in the great themes of Holy Week. Betrayal. Denial. Fleeing to safety to avoid the risk, hypocrisy, prejudice, and indifference which is what causes my lack of passion. Appealing to the law when it suits me, my unwillingness to stay awake and watch. I edit my life by anesthitizing my memories.

The memory that Holy Week seeks to revive is one that lies deep within everyone. It is the memory that enables us

to remember the painful things of our past without despair. The Great Memory is simply this: God has fallen in love with you and wants you to come home. Your very first memory, if only you could get back to it, is that of being God's joy and delight. So much of our time in Lent is spent in remembering our own sinfulness, our own inability to go it on our own, in order to open us up to remembering this first Great Memory. The love that brought us into the world, that delighted in us, is still with us, available to us, and, in spite of our misgivings and disbelief, is able to pull us through the gate of death. When I truly internalize this message I find myself in the place beyond argument. The whirlwind of God's love does not compel belief. It simply is. I suppose having reached this place I could say No. But the truth is that arguing and negotiating with a whirlwind is a bit absurd. God's whirlwind carries us home. Its refreshing energy heals our wounds.

"Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up into heaven by a whirlwind . . . (2 Kings 2)." What a fantastic way to begin a story! Elijah is one of my favorite characters in the Old Testament. There is passion and excitement in the story that stirs something inside me to ask the question, how am I going to die - clinically and alone, or with chariots and horses of fire?

The question, "How am I going to die?" raises for me another even more urgent one: "How am I going to live?" If the Christian faith is about anything, it is about the true source of life and our need to sniff out where it is. A sense of smell is essential because patterns of death are easily made up to look like promises of life. Death is, at times, a brilliant cosmetician.

The story of the ascension of Elijah is about the passing on of life. It has its funny side in that Elijah spends a good deal of time trying to lose Elisha, or rather, to test him to see if he is in earnest about being a prophet. Elisha asks for a double share of Elijah's spirit. In order to receive it, he has to take care not to miss the main event. "And as they still went on and talked, behold, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven." To understand where the true sources of life and vitality are we have to be like Elisha: expect great things from God and be continually attentive.

We live in an age that is appallingly ignorant with regard to Christianity understood as a mystery. By mystery I do not mean something vague and wooly, but rather an acknowledgment of the stupendous reality in which we live, and move, and have our being. The ignorance of this mystery is nowhere more appalling than among some of Christianity's most vigorous practitioners. Christianity has largely lost its ability to surprise. There is no fire. This is because our profound ignorance is covered with a thick layer of

supposed familiarity. Holy Week restores the element of surprise by not only showing us God's Passion but by throwing us into the midst of the action.

Christianity tends to be identified with three things that mislead us with regard to its abiding mystery. It is often identified with institutions, with dogmas, and with the West. These three are not to be discounted, but they do not begin to exhaust the mystery. Left to themselves they tend to drain the drama of its vitality and passion. Even those who claim to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ have been seduced by this three-fold identification.

There was an advertisement recently in the magazine Career Highlights which is directed to college students. It read: "In the 60s the word was love; in the 70s it was peace. In the 80s it's money. We can help you make it." Such promises are made with regard to Christianity too. To be a Christian is to make it, to be a success. Christianity becomes motivationally equivalent to Geritol. "Take this product regularly and you will be successful, youthfully middle-aged, and always happy." That, of course, is a cruel --if attractive--lie, and many religious people are trying to live that lie. I don't want Geritol. I want a whirlwind and chariots of fire!

We long for the fire and passion of Elijah's ascension and the maturity in believing of faith of which we read in Paul's letter to the Ephesians (4:1ff) of our unity and giftedness in the Spirit that is luring us, calling us to, "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." Our living and our liveliness are found in our growing up into Christ--together, not alone. And Divine Mystery, the unknown and unmanipulable, is the context and the condition of our growing up.

When the Greek Fathers of the early Church talked about us as being made after the image of God, they saw us as somehow unfinished and incomplete. This incompleteness is both our glory and our pain: our glory because there is always more to be revealed about each one of us--we advance from glory to glory. There is pain because, like a wound, our incompleteness is a continual reminder that our destiny lies elsewhere. We might put the two ideas of glory and pain together and say that a human being is one who is wounded by glory. You can catch a glimpse of it on the face of another at particular moments. The glory can be seen when a person, while remaining truly himself, rises above himself and is something more. It is this "something more" that we need to cherish and learn to love.

The writer to the Ephesians names this call to "something more," this pull of transcendence, a process of, "growing up into Christ." Our destiny is not a world-hating one. The One in whom we are to grow up is one of us. And in this realization, Holy Week brings the ascent to the fullness of our humanity.

What strikes out against our becoming fully human is seen in the biblical metaphor of hardness of heart. This is what keeps us closed to the fire and mystery inside us. We are not, for instance, open to forgiveness because in our hardness we believe there is nothing to be forgiven.

The secret of life (which is the secret of Holy Week) is that life comes out of death. Learning to die is, therefore, the most important lesson we can learn. There is no growth without a kind of dying. On one of the earliest Christian tombstones we read, "We must die while we live unless when we come to die we shall be dead indeed."

How am I going to die? How am I going to live? Where is my soul? Elijah was taken up by a whirlwind. What or who takes you up? Our whirlwind is Christ--to take you up, out of yourself, and form a deeper "you."

No wonder Christianity is best described as a love story. God has fallen in love with you and wants you to come home. What greater force in all of existence is there than love? It continually takes us by surprise.

When it comes, it comes without warning
Just as I'm picking my nose.
Will it knock at my door in the morning,
Or tread in the bus on my toes?
Will it come like a change in the weather?
Will its greeting be courteous or rough?
Will it alter my life altogether?
O tell me the truth about love. (Linda Blanford in
Manchester Guardian Weekly)

The love of Holy Week is a whirlwind of life-altering passion that you can ignore or accept. The choice is yours. if you want to see just how far God has fallen in love with you, then look at Jesus--look at Jesus on the cross. I shrink back from what the cross represents in its pain. But it is the only way I know that brings me, not only home to God, but home to myself and to you. Our place of meeting is in the heart of God and during this week it is the scene of hurt and conflict. I cannot get home without allowing myself to be taken up by the One who died on the cross.

CHAPTER 8

Interview and Sermons: Bob Morley
Pastor, Newport Center United Methodist Church,
Corona Del Mar, Calif.

Interview

First of all let's face it--baby boomers are the entertainment generation so the sermon has to be interesting. The sermon also has to be relevant and the most frequent comment that I get from baby boomers about my sermons is that, "it made me think about it in a new way. I've never looked at it like that before." They really like to get thinking in a new direction about a subject.

I have often described my preaching style as, "the Laugh In style." You remember how Laugh In was in little segments that had nothing to do with each other. They would go from something that was very funny to something that was very serious. You'd still be laughing about the last thing and realize they had clobbered you with this heavy piece. Then about the time that soaked in they got you laughing again.

The media have taught people to do that. If you ever watch a movie on television they stop the movie in the middle of something and run you a Coke commercial and you'll go right back to the same mood you were in before the Coke commercial. It's incredible! Baby boomers are used to

doing that, to shifting all over the place and taking all this information in. So my sermons can do that too.

Sometimes I'll tell the story in the first part of the sermon and not make the application until the end of the sermon. I'll tell the story and let them hang there, then I'll go to something else. At the end of the story I don't say to them, "I'll come back to this later." I just drop that and go to this. They expect that it will become apparent later how the story fits. If it doesn't they let me know! So you just drop things and go on to something else and then return to it and you can have people laughing and crying in the same moment. We owe that to the media. The average commercial on television changes frames every four seconds--sometimes faster--and some of the jumps are totally irrational, but people, especially the baby boom generation, follow along.

I think story telling is probably the most powerful thing in preaching. Obviously it's what Jesus did. That's because story telling is the best possible attention getting device. When you notice your congregation is starting to drift all you have to do is say, "Now I want to tell you a story." Everybody loves to hear a story.

I use a lot of personal stories. I think when you claim your own story it gives other people the right to claim their story. The problem with using a Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Albert Schweitzer story is it makes your or my

Christian journey look so trivial by comparison. So I use my story for illustrations: average kid who grew up in Kansas on a farm. My parents didn't beat me. They weren't alcoholics. I didn't have any big crises in my life, but God still came to me. Give people permission to look at their lives and how God is speaking to them.

With baby boomers you can't assume they know anything about the Bible. I hate to say that, but it's true. Oh, I have people who've been Methodists over 40 years and they don't know the Bible either, but that's not really typical of their generation. When I introduce baby boomers to something in the Bible more often than not they're wide-eyed. That's because they've never encountered it before. I make sure when I read the scripture therefore that I explain its background and discuss what the scripture means. When I make a reference to a person--to Moses or Elijah or anyone else--I never assume that they recognize who they are. I always explain about whom I'm talking.

Take Jacob wrestling with the angel. It occurs to me when I read that passage that a good percentage of my congregation--the new baby boomers--won't know who Jacob is. Without some explanation the story of the wrestling match is lost on them. As a result I may end up preaching two or more sermons on a particular text. In the first sermon I'll set up the story--I'll talk about Jacob's life and how he had gotten to the place where the wrestling match took

place-- and the next Sunday or Sundays I'll build on that. I find that baby boomers really do want to know the Bible. I think biblical exposition therefore is the most important kind of preaching for them.

I try to put things in terms people understand. I say, "this is how it looks in our everyday life." My Easter sermon two years ago was probably the best example of that. I read the regular Easter text where the women went to the tomb and came back and told the disciples, but the disciples didn't believe them. Then I commented that in a scientific society like our own the idea of a person who is dead getting up and walking away is pretty far fetched. It's really hard for us to put our minds around. What's more some of us may feel guilty that it's so hard for us today to buy rising from the dead hook, line, and sinker. But what I point out from the scripture lesson is that the first disciples didn't believe in rising from the dead either. It was hard for them to believe it too. As a matter of fact they gave Jesus up for dead; they went back to fishing! They didn't buy it either so we're in pretty good company. Peter, James, and John had a tough time getting their minds around the resurrection too!

I'm a writer. I'll labor over a word like poets do. Poets spend a day and a half figuring out exactly the right word. I will too. I may even invent a word. In my sermon on the lost sheep I wrote, "The good news is that no matter

how lost we are, God will come looking. The 'loster' the sheep the more diligent the search." "Loster" is somehow better than, "the more lost." It's powerful. That's because the use of the right word at the right time is very powerful.

Preachers expect a lot of a congregation. We expect them to sit listening to us attentively every Sunday when they know the sound of our voice, they know our cadence, they know our gestures and mannerisms, they know our speech patterns, and they know which words we're likely to use and when and where our emphasis is going to be. We're all too predictable! Now that will lull them off to sleep! Therefore the parts of the sermon I have some control over --using different phrases and working on using different wording--is important to getting their attention.

I don't read my sermons. I write a manuscript, but I very often never refer to it at all. There are parts of my manuscript that I intentionally say word for word, but if it sounds like I'm reading, it sounds like a lecture. A lecturer can get away with that. A preacher can't. That's because preaching demands some sense of the immediacy of discovery. I can't provide that when I'm reading off the page.

When it comes to preaching to baby boomers I let the text speak especially when it's prophetic--when people are not necessarily comfortable with what they hear. I run the

risk of going places in sermons I don't necessarily want to go and where people in my congregation may not want me to go, but that I feel the text would like to go. An example is all the commentary in the gospels about the danger of wealth. I'm in a wealthy church in south Orange County. What do I do when I come to a text that says it's harder for the rich to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle? But I think baby boomers really want the preacher to tell them what's in the Bible even when it makes them uncomfortable. When the preacher is really proclaiming the gospel they know it and like it even when they don't like it--if you know what I mean. I think preachers have to be risk takers.

When I preach I realize that baby boomers maybe are people who haven't shown up in church for a couple of decades. The reason is that the most pressing questions in their lives before were mostly success-oriented kinds of questions: Am I going to get to go to Stanford? What kind of job am I going to get? How much money am I going to make? Who am I going to marry? Now maybe they've got two BMWs, a nice house, and a nice wife and kids so they've got those questions answered. Now they're beginning to realize there are other questions--questions about the meaning of life; why am I here type questions.

Having answered the questions of success other questions begin to gnaw on them like what does it mean to me

to be this person that I am and what does it mean for me to be the parent of this child? They come to church with questions of meaning because it's the only place they know to look. And when they come to church they expect to hear the answers to what it means to be a real person, what a real person looks like, whether God really exists - and if God exists, what claim God has on my life. Those are precisely the questions of scripture.

I think there's a spirituality around that seems to be affecting baby boomers which is not really coming from the church--it's kind of a grass roots spirituality. But I think that the church that's authentic will benefit from this spirituality because people are coming to church under its influence hoping the church has something to say to it.

Sermons

"And He Came for Me"

Luke 15:1-10 and I Timothy 1:12-17

"I fled Him, down the nights and down the days: I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind, and in the mist of tears I hid from Him, and under running laughter. Up vistaed hopes I sped; and shot, precipitated adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears, from those strong feet that followed, followed after. But with unhurrying chase, and unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instancy, they beat - and a Voice beat more instant than the feet--lo, all things fly thee, for thou fliest me!"

Those are the first lines from Francis Thompson's poem, "The Hound of Heaven." In the United Methodist Church there is currently a committee which has been commissioned to study and recommend to the churches appropriate names for God. I wonder if they have considered Hound of Heaven as a

possibility. Probably not; it's not a very flattering image, God as a bloodhound relentlessly pursuing us, sniffing us out in our secret hiding places--the labyrinth of our own minds. Perhaps not a very flattering picture but theologically, right on. When I was a kid in Kansas, every worship service ended with an altar call. The place where they knelt was called the mourners bench and the people who knelt there were called seekers. Sometimes they would weep and pray long agonizing prayers. Sometimes the prayers would go on for literally hours while a backsliding sinner begged and pleaded with a reluctant God to let them back into the fold.

All of this left the firm impression on my young mind that God must be earnestly sought with agonizing intensity for He was elusive and aloof and easily offended. Therefore we must seek Him with much penitence and fervor and diligence lest we lose him and in losing him lose the opportunity to redeem your mortal soul. The Biblical image is exactly 180 degrees from that. We don't seek God, God seeks us. God finds us! One day we wake up and realize that we have been found, that's all. There is a principle here, a pretty simple one - the one who is lost doesn't do the finding. The sinner kneeling at the mourners bench is not the seeker, God is! It's an absurd notion that the lost sheep, you and I, seek the shepherd. No! The Bible declares that the shepherd seeks us.

Remember when you were a little child and your parents would tell you if you got lost to hug a tree; to stay in one place and they would come and get you. When you are lost the best you can do is hold your ground and pray that the shepherd cares enough about you to come looking. According to the Bible, God cares so much that He will abandon the other sheep, even the whole flock, just to go looking for you. In the incredible economy of the gospel the "loster" you are the more valuable you become. It may not be good grammar but it's good theology and it's good news.

Which points up another great absurdity about the way we humans think--people say of themselves and others, "I'm a lost cause, I am too far from God, I can't remember the last time I darkened the door of a church. I'm a sinner through and through, God wouldn't be interested in the likes of me." You are exactly the guy that God is looking for. What do you think the definition of lost is anyhow? Daniel Boone once said he was never lost in his entire life but there were about 3 days once when he didn't know for sure where he was. That's what it means to be lost, to be so far away you can't find your way back by yourself. Those people who consider themselves lost causes are on the top of God's search and rescue list. To the ones who are the most lost he applies the most urgency, even to the extent of leaving the others just to find you! That's the good news.

Then Jesus changes the metaphor. The parables often come in pairs to make sure the people don't miss the point. "What woman having 10 silver coins if she loses one does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search diligently until she finds it? When she does she invites her friends over and they have a party, just like the angels partied when God found old lost you."

There is something important here that I want you to see even if it's not really part of this sermon. Or maybe it is precisely the point of this sermon because it speaks to the question of who Jesus thought was important enough to seek after. The second parable is directed specifically to women. The first parable was about things men could understand, then a follow up parable about images with which women could relate. That may not seem like much now but in Jesus' day it was revolutionary. Women were lucky to even be allowed in the room when a Rabbi was teaching and even if they were, no self-respecting rabbi would stoop to acknowledging them much less directing his remarks specifically to them. Jaws must have dropped all over the room when Jesus said, "What woman having ten silver coins." Jesus was careful to include women in his teaching.

Now, when you hear people complain that churches care too much about inclusive language issues and some of the changes in the hymn lyrics are uncomfortable, you just remind them of this parable, we have excellent Biblical authority for our inclusiveness. Our Lord in His teachings about salvation made it a point to be inclusive even back when women were considered little more than property. We are very comfortable with the image of God as a shepherd who seeks lost sheep, then holds them gently in his arms as he carries them safely back to the fold. It's a major theme of religious art. It crops up in Sunday School literature or on bulletin covers all the time, the good shepherd who rescues lost sheep.

If we are going to be true to scripture and the teaching of our Lord we must work to become equally comfortable with the image of God as a housewife sweeping the house looking for a lost coin. Where are the bulletin covers with the picture of a woman with a lantern and a broom--or better yet a vacuum cleaner and a flashlight.

And I want you to notice something else about these two parables. Though they make the same main point they are slightly different. You see sheep and coins get lost for different reasons.

I read an interview with a shepherd once. Since most of us don't encounter shepherds often and we don't know much about the subtleties of the job of sheep herding I found the interview interesting. The shepherd was asked how sheep get lost. He said sheep have a short attention span. (Sound like anyone you know?) Sheep are into immediate need gratification. (Sound familiar?) All they can think about

it getting to the nearest lush clump of grass, then the next one and the next. "Finally," he said, "they just nibbled themselves lost." Sheep don't get lost all at once, you see, but a little at a time.

Coins are another story. Coins get lost because of someone else's negligence. Some people get lost because of other people's negligence, especially the children. They are like little silver and gold coins that we hold in our hands. But they need someone to keep them from getting tarnished, to protect them from those who would steal them away, to teach them to hug a tree and expect the good shepherd to come looking for them. They are lost by the 1000s on the streets of southeast L.A., little silver and gold coins that someone didn't care enough about.

There was a whole pocket full of them in worship with us this morning. How many of them will be lost because of someone else's negligence? The next time you are called on to help with the children and youth, to teach a class or help with a fellowship activity, before you say, "No, I am too busy," remember this parable of the lost coin. Some things are lost because of someone else's lack of caring. Some people say they don't need to help because they don't have any children in the program. Don't you? How about those children who were with us in this room this morning; who do you think they belong to? Who do you think God thinks they belong to?

The good news is that no matter how lost we are or why, God will come looking. The "loster" the sheep the more diligent the search.

I know it's true because He came for Paul, a "loster" sheep one could not imagine. Paul knew it! Listen to his confession, "I blasphemed, persecuted and insulted him, I acted ignorantly in unbelief." You can't get much more lost than that. Paul said, "that saying is really true, you know, that one that goes, 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.' Here I am at the head of line, the biggest sinner of them all, the 'lostest' of the lost, and God found me. The grace of our Lord overflowed for me with faith and love and I was appointed to His service." Paul can't talk about it without getting all excited and going into a doxology. "To the king of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen."

You know that God is some kind of a blood hound when He can sniff out a guy as lost as Paul. And He came for me. He came for me in Eudora, Kansas. I thought I was pretty safely hidden from Him there. Not even Billy Graham came to Eudora, Kansas. He went to places like New York and L.A., London, Paris, Tokyo. But Billy Graham was never going to hold a crusade in Eudora, Kansas; and if Billy wasn't going to come there it was unlikely that God was ever going to discover it. Maybe that's why people called it a God forsaken place. But He did come. He came looking for me

and He found me in Eudora, Kansas. He found me there when I was 14, or maybe He found me sooner than that and I didn't figure it out until I was 14. However it was sure a surprise. I figured He must have come for a whole bunch of more important people and decided to pick me up while He was in the area. But no, He had made the trip just for me.

And you know what He said. "All that I took from thee was not for thy harm but just that thou might seek it in my arms. All that thy childish mistake thought was lost I have stored for thee at home. Rise, clasp my hand, and come."

And the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with faith and love and He picked me out to be in His service. Me, a little 14 year old, skinny kid from Kansas! You know what I said? I'm sure what I said at that moment was no where near as profound as what Paul said but the intent was the same. "To the king of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God be honor and glory for ever and ever, Amen."

"The Opening Act"

Mark 1: 1-8

Some people plan to go to concerts an hour late. That's because they know there will be some unknown opening act the first 40 minutes. Then it takes another 20 minutes to reset the stage before the real group comes out. The opening act faces an impossible challenge. The auditorium is only half full. The sound system has all the levels and EQs set for the main act so everybody sounds terrible and, besides, no one came to hear them anyhow. I'm sympathetic because I've been the opening act a few times and it's tough. I opened for Gabe Kaplan for a week at the Ice House back when he was doing Welcome Back Kotter. The only gratifying moment of the whole week was when June Allison told me she enjoyed my performance.

The only time I really felt vindicated as an opening act was when I went on at a convention before Gene Roddenberry, the creator of Star Trek. He may be great as a creative producer, but as a speaker he was awful. About half way through his speech the guy who scheduled me came over and asked if I would go on again after Roddenberry had finished and try to rescue the evening.

John the Baptist was an opening act. He came to warm up the audience and introduce Jesus. And an eloquent introduction it was; so eloquent in fact that the audience didn't realize that he was the opening act. They thought he was the main show. He spoke with the thundering authority of the Old Testament prophets: no holds barred, no time for tact; every sermon was hellfire and brimstone.

And that costume, a camel hair shirt with a big leather belt, a diet of honey coated grasshoppers. No one had seen

anything like it since Elijah. So they came out to see him in droves to listen to him preach; always the same sermon: "Repent !". Then he baptized them in the Jordan River. The scriptures said that all the country of Judea came to see him and all the people of Jerusalem. That's like saying Orange County and everybody in Los Angeles. I'll tell you, when John the Baptist tickets went on sale you had to get in line early.

So imagine their amazement when John the Baptist walked to the apron of the stage and announced that he wasn't even the main show, he was just the opening act. He said something like this, "You ain't seen nothing yet. The act coming up next is so great. I'm not even qualified to lace up his shoes. You think it's cool that I baptize you with water? This next guy will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Wow!

That's why John proclaimed his message with such fervor and urgency. "Repent," he said. Change the way you think and the way you behave. Turn yourself around and go the other way. It wasn't just an early version of pop psychology; the New Testament's answer to the power of positive thinking. John was not telling them to repent of their sins so that they would be nicer people and live more fulfilled lives. He told them to repent because the Prince of Peace was coming, the one who would baptize them with the holy spirit and they had to repent in order to be ready. Their present attitude and behavior would not be acceptable in the kingdom that the Prince of Peace would be Lord over.

And they all knew what that world ought to look like. Their song writers and troubadours had been singing it to them for centuries.

"Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; Righteousness and peace will kiss each other; Faithfulness will spring up from the ground and righteousness will look down from the sky." In other words, righteousness, faith, peace, and love are going to be everywhere. That's the way the world is supposed to look when the Prince of Peace comes. That's the way your heart is supposed to look and if it doesn't you had better repent, says John the Baptist, or you won't be ready when the main act takes the stage. So they repented, confessed their sins, and were baptized because they knew the song of their hearts was out of harmony with the song their prophet had taught them to sing. It was a love song not unlike the song the angels sang one silent night: "Peace on earth, goodwill among people." That's how it will be when the Prince of Peace comes. "It came upon a midnight clear, that glorious song of old, from angels banding near the earth to touch their hearts of gold."

"For lo the days are hastening on, by prophet seen of old, when with the ever circling years shall come the time foretold. When peace shall cover all the earth, its ancient

splendors fling and the whole world send back the song which the angels sing."

The whole world is going to take up this song of peace, this love song of the angels, and if you and I aren't singing this song when the Prince of Peace comes, there won't be any place for us in the choir because that's how it's going to be. It's not a hope, it's a promise. So if love and peace, and faith and righteousness are not principle motivators of our lives and our institutions then we need to repent, turn around, get with the program, start moving in a new and better direction.

A new member of the congregation handed me a note after church last Sunday. One of the lines of the note was this, "There are 45,000 body bags that have been shipped to Saudi Arabia." I don't know why that line hit me with such force. After all, those are the kinds of things you have to do to prepare for war. Some committee of planners at the Pentagon projected how many body bags would probably be needed, then some civil service worker put in the requisition. Someone manufactured that plastic canvas and those heavy duty zippers that close with such finality. Somewhere, some working people have better job security this Christmas because of that requisition. Some factory manufactured those 45,000 body bags, packed them in cardboard boxes, and put them on a truck for the Pentagon. Or maybe they shipped them airmail to be sure they got there in time.

I wonder what it's like to make the money to buy Christmas gifts to celebrate the coming of the Prince of Peace by making body bags. I guess I should know. Being an American citizen that requisition form had my signature on it.

I wonder if the Iraqis have ordered body bags from their factories. Of course theirs will have to come in three sizes: men, women, and children.

Across town there's another plant working overtime; the one that makes the little white crosses. And somewhere they are tuning up those machines they use to dig graves in the frozen earth at Arlington Cemetery.

We Americans cannot lend our voices to the angel's song of peace at the same time we lend our hands to filling body bags. We have to repent. The Prince of Peace is coming and we won't be ready to greet him.

I wrote a letter to President Bush last week. In it I told him that we used part of his Thanksgiving proclamation in our worship service here at the church, that part where it said, "Let us gratefully turn our hearts to God, the loving source of all life and liberty. Let us seek His forgiveness for our shortcomings and transgressions and renew our determination to remain a people worthy of His continued favor and protection, acknowledging our dependency on the Almighty, and obeying His commandments. . . ." I quoted those words in my letter then I called on him to live

up to them. If we speak those lovely words at those lovely times of the year like Thanksgiving and Christmas, then go on with life, business-as-usual; if we sing the songs of peace while preparing for war--we are hypocrites. We must repent; the Prince of Peace is coming and we are not ready.

No, I don't imagine that George Bush actually wrote that Thanksgiving proclamation; some speech writer did that probably. He may not even have read it. But he signed it, and therefore I'm within my rights as an American to call him to live up to it.

When I joined the church about 35 years ago the preacher asked me if I professed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and if I would pledge my allegiance to His kingdom. I may not even have been listening at that moment; but I said, "Yes!" And so did you when you joined the church. And now it is not only my right, but my responsibility as a preacher of the gospel of Christ to call all of us to live up to that commitment. We have pledged our allegiance to Christ's kingdom and it is a kingdom of peace. Its national anthem is a love song foretold by prophets, sung in our hearing by a choir of angels. We cannot, we dare not, join in the angels song until we have lent our hands to doing something to slow this headlong plunge into a war that everyone agrees is avoidable. We may lose our advantage; that seems to be his worry. We may have to swallow a national ego--maybe even confess some complicity in the economic injustice that helped to bring about this crisis in the first place. Maybe we will need to repent. It's a small price to assure that 45,000 body bags will remain in the warehouse--unused.

I got into a fight when I was a senior in high school. It was the only real fight I've ever been in, that is, the only fight where we were big enough to actually hurt one another. The interesting thing about it was that I had all day to think about it. It began early one morning with a statement being made that came out a little harsher than I intended and his response a little more bitter than he intended. The conflict was carried on from there by proxy; you know those people who love to carry messages back and forth between combatants to keep things stirred up. By noon I had been issued the challenge by his emissary. "I'll meet you in the high school parking lot at 4:00 P.M.."

So I had all afternoon to think about the fight. I wished it would just go away but I feared it wouldn't. So I decided how I would conduct myself when the moment came. I wouldn't back down, I decided, and it wouldn't be just pushing and shoving like we did when we were little kids. We would do this one with real fists. And come 4:00 P.M. we did, just like I had planned it. It remains one of the saddest and most disappointing memories of my life because at no time during that day had I considered what my discipleship to Christ would have me do--maybe some

confession, some meekness, some peace making. I might have said, "I'm sorry, this has gotten out of hand. I never intended it to. I really don't want this fight." I didn't say any of that. What bothers me more than the fact that I didn't say it is the fact that I never even thought about it. When it came right down to it, I relied more on the image of manhood I had gotten from T.V. cop shows than the image of manhood put forth by the one I called Lord and to whose kingdom I had pledged allegiance.

Write a letter to the President or to your representative; the address is in the bulletin. Wherever you go, talk peace, think peace, pray peace and in the undaunted style of John the Baptist, demand peace. Dwight Eisenhower once prophesied that the day would come when the people would want peace so badly that the government would have to get out of the way and let them have it. Today, let us make that prophesy a reality; it's the only way we can be ready when the Prince of Peace comes. The only way we can be part of the chorus on that day when the whole world sends back the song which now the angels sing.

CHAPTER 9

Interview and Sermons: Rick Nelson
Pastor, Cross and Crown Lutheran Church,
Rancho Cucamonga, Calif.

Interview

In preaching to baby boomers the critical point is the "so what" of the text--spending time in relevant, articulate, issue oriented preaching. For that reason I've moved in my preaching to spending a greater deal of my time on the connection, on the "so what?" itself. Previously I did a lot of what I would call "teaching" about the text and saved some portion at the end, five minutes or something, to make some connections. But to reach baby boomers I move as quickly as I can through the text to get to the connection--or maybe weave the text into the connection, but it's always the "so what?" I'm addressing.

I'm trying to connect with baby boomers emotionally as well, trying to stir them spiritually. I want to cause them to ask some hard questions about today. When they walk out of this church I want them to be going home in the car saying, "Gosh, that really hit me." At least I hope some of them are doing that.

Then there's the sense of "we" with baby boomers. In preaching to them there's no, "You, but I; you feel this, but I feel" I try to affirm as often as I can their

experience of the world as it is. Look at the fifth paragraph of my sermon "You Wonder, Don't You?" I begin with the words, "We're born into an anxious world where threats from every side, multiple, irrational dangers" That's a point of connection and I want to establish also something else that's important to baby boomers: the fact that I've got nothing special that they don't have a line on. I mean they need to know that I get scared and worried about the same things they do and that being a Christian doesn't just "take care of that" all the time. Life's a constant battle. Your walk with Christ will be the same way.

In some non-denominational churches the message all too often is, "when you get things right your life will turn around. Do all the right things--get your prayer life together, go to church regularly, sacrifice financially, and give of your time and everything will be fine." I think that's a bunch of bull. Their marriage goes bad on them or their business fails and they're bankrupt. Then what are they going to do? In the mainline church we get the repair jobs from those congregations.

I think one of the strengths of mainline Protestant preaching still is that it relates the gospel to life issues and struggles openly with them in a stimulating and thought provoking way. The answers are left for the listeners to draw their own conclusions. To me preaching to baby boomers

is not bundled and wrapped up all neat and packaged: this is how you think about capital punishment; this is what this means about abortion. At first I think it's the simplest thing for baby boomers to latch on to. But it is not terribly challenging. And what I find is that they sort of grow up or beyond that. They get to the point where they want to do their own thinking and struggling and expect to hear Biblical preaching that is characterized by an excitement about the gospel, but not packaged so neatly. I think they like to think, need to think, but they also want to be excited.

Baby boomers want to hear someone who's excited about what they're doing. I'm still very excited by the gospel and what it has to say about the way I live, the way I think about myself and the way I think about the world in which I live. I want to let them pick up on my excitement. A lot of what I say therefore comes from my gut, and when you communicate from the heart these people know the difference. I think this baby boom generation does particularly. They've been swindled in politics, they've been swindled in religion and everything else. They're very mistrustful and they can pick up whether you're full of b.s. or if you're letting them in on something real. They are a very perceptive generation. They can tell if I'm talking from my gut. They can tell if it's something personal, if I'm sharing my pain. So I let myself be seen a little bit, let them know a little

bit about myself, know my frailties and strengths, know if I've got a sense of humor or not; know how I'm doing in my marriage--how God holds my wife and me together as a couple.

I think a lot of that is risky stuff for pastors. You're opening yourself up to a particular pain or victory. It's like in my sermon "You Wonder Don't You?" It's about the Second Coming. This is a very reflective, personal sermon. I wondered what if Jesus were to come tomorrow--and I tell you what I wondered. I wonder if I was angry with anyone, I'd want to make it right. I wonder if I owed anyone anything, I'd want to take care of that. I also wondered if I'd leave anything of any lasting significance. I wondered in the first person about these things and then at the end I just asked the question: "These are the wonders that I would wonder about if the world were to end; I'd have no time to do anything about it. Do you ever wonder what you'd do? Why put it off? Let's get on with it." This was just all honest contemplation.

I think the one big booming question for baby boomers is the meaning question. What does it all mean? Is there any meaning to what I'm doing every day or is it all sort of a waste? Without an answer the result is hopelessness and depression; meaninglessness. I know baby boomers are living in a consumer's paradise and they want to hear how to get their marriage fixed, how to get their business fixed, how to get their spirituality put together, how to pray. But

when the stuff hits the fan, mainly what they're looking for is meaning. In some ways it's a search for something that's missing. Something in my life, or in our marriage, or in our family is missing and they're asking what is it? They want to find out more about God. They want to ask what God has in store for them. How is that going to affect the way that I live?

I think it's exciting. Preaching excites me and I allow the excitement to come out. When they start to question and struggle and personally start to wrestle with the question of meaning on their own I'm excited. I love what I do and I want people to know I love what I do because I'm sure that we've got a life changing gospel. It's that way for me and I give testimony to that every week when I preach.

I work hard at trying to condense, trying to pack in what I can in a short enough time. I just feel that the attention span of that whole generation is much shorter. You can do a whole study on why that is, and people have done that--the media, but I preach shorter. I preach about I'd say 15 to 17 minutes. So my sermon is short. I talk about the gospel quickly. I talk about the epistle quickly, then I'll make the connections.

My second sermon is from the Old Testament. I do preach a lot from the Old Testament. The reason for that is I believe that in the Old Testament we've got a lot of shady

characters and it's much more interesting preaching when you look at those guys--the prophets and a lot of the other characters running around. You know they're real people. Those are screwed up, God fearing, yet confused people. I love to preach about that stuff. This sermon is from the book of Exodus; that's where the commandments are. I start at the beginning talking about silence and how in silence we sometimes lose our track. We're not sure what God wants for us. We wonder where God's guidance is in all this garbage. Silence. And I go right to the Ten Commandments comparing them to the owner's manual for a new car, not a law.

This sermon is sort of a different look at the commandments. I think that that's an example of the kind of message that the baby boomer generation really needs to hear. It's not all cut out and clear. You think that when you get the first one down you move on to the second commandment. Then when you get that down you move on to the third commandment. Then you spend time on the fourth--and so on. No. Then how do you approach the Ten Commandments? Well you ask the question, "what does God want from me?" God wants you to have a full life: an abundant blessed life. He wants you to be joyful; He wants you to celebrate; He wants to shower you with blessing, with that kind of full life. But God gives that to you as a gift. When you want to know how to make your car run best you look at the manual and see what to do, but still it's no guarantee. Your life

is like that new car. You follow the rules, but you know if you do it right there's still no guarantee you're not going to drive down the freeway when the dumb transmission flies out. Now are you going to get all irate or are you just going to understand that about life?

In this sermon I compare the prophets to the mechanics who are answering the question, "What's wrong with the car?" Well this is it. This is what's wrong with it. You can spend \$200 bucks on it and do this or spend a whole lot and do this. It's up to you.

Sermons

"You Wonder, Don't You?"
Luke 21:25-36

One Sunday, a preacher was delivering a particularly stirring sermon on sin and damnation. Suddenly a storm blew in. The lightening flashed. The thunder crashed and the lights in the church went out just as the preacher reached his conclusion.

"Well" he thought, "That should put the fear of God into 'em." After the service a woman approached the preacher outside on the front steps and thanked him for the fine sermon. "You know," she confided, "when the lights went out, all I could think was, 'there goes the food in the refrigerator.'"

It is amazing how in the midst of extraordinary events, we cannot escape ordinary habits. In today's gospel Jesus draws us a picture of the end of the world. How would we respond to such an event? Scripture seems to understand our human propensities. In another passage about the end of the world, the gospel warns us not to go back to the house to get our coats! So let's say the world is ending. We have shut off the gas, stopped the paper, and let out the cat. What do we do now? For my part, I would wonder. In fact, I would have four "wonders."

If the world was ending I would first wonder if I was angry with anyone, or they with me. Seems like a small worry, but then again what else of value do people have

except each other? Food and shelter are certainly not enough for a human existence.

We are born into an anxious world. We are threatened from every side with multiple, irrational dangers. We need the harmony of rational relationships. Life can become intolerable under the displeasure of another human being. We owe each other at least this much, that we do not froth at the mouth over each other's existence.

That leads into my second "wonder"--if the world were ending, I would wonder if I owed anybody anything. I don't mean large things like house payments or parental repayment for the gift of birth or patriotic repayment for my freedom. I mean personal things. When Socrates was dying, his last words were, "I owe Asclepius a rooster . . . pay it back without fail." Now Socrates was arguably one of the wisest people ever to roam this earth. Surely, we might expect from him something more profound for posterity. And yet, if we are faithful in small matters, we are indeed trustworthy!

Each of us is born naked and penniless into a crowded world. In the course of life, greed or lust or self pity or something else tempts us to stray over into another person's bailiwick. On a temporary basis, that is understandable and forgivable. But the final curtain should not fall with my hand in someone else's pocket. So I wonder, do I owe someone a friend, a commission, an apology, a compliment, a hug, a chicken?

If the world were ending, I would go on to my third wonder. I would wonder if I had added any goodness or truth or beauty to the earth. Nothing grandiose, necessarily, because we can give only what we have. It is not a matter of giving more than we got. This would be a very simple, ordinary "wonder." Did I once do something only because it was good, no matter how it turned out? Or without stalling long enough to ask, "what's in it for me?" Did I once trace the truth to its conclusion, no matter where it led? Did I add to the beauty of the human trail, instead of to its trash?

Finally (and that is not a pun!) if the world were ending, I would wonder: do I really believe in God? Is that Person coming on the clouds the Son of God or Rambo? Today we begin that time of waiting that we call Advent. We wait patiently and expectantly for the one who will fulfill our human hopes, and make real our deepest dreams. In this season of Advent, it is very possible to confuse Jesus Christ and Santa Claus. It makes a big difference whether you are waiting for the ice cream man or for the Lord of heaven and earth!

It also matters what you expect from Him. If a father promises a child that they will go fishing when he gets home from work, the child will be happily busy all day, digging for worms, unkinking the line, oiling the reel. The time will fly by in happy anticipation! On the other hand, if a

child breaks a window, and the mother warns, "Just wait 'till your father gets home!" then, what tribulation! the day is ruined, overcast with woe in sad anticipation. Obviously, what we do while we wait for someone makes a big difference!

But not all the difference. The One coming also has something to say about the encounter. You know as well as I, that there are all kinds of parents and a variety of possible responses. When faced with a broken window, different parents may spank, rant, reason, or forgive, even help you fix the window so you both can get fishing faster. So it is with our waiting for Jesus--an awful lot depends on what we think of Him.

So I wonder about what I believe, because real belief in the true God is not an obvious choice in today's world. All kinds of people are leading very satisfied lives without the least shred of faith in God. We should follow the practice of a great theologian and make part of our daily prayer a petition to remain faithful. If taken seriously, faith is such a delicate, fragile, fluctuating posture in this world of ours. Because faith is forged in this world the blazing presence of God face to face will leave little room for doubt. But here we live in the midst of doubt among competing possibilities. Faith is a hard victory. It is the conviction that we are not the last word. That there is someone beyond the human and that someone loves us. The conviction that all the broken windows can be fixed!

Well if the world were ending those are the "wonders" I would wonder. But if the world were ending I would have no time left to do anything about them! I might be better off if I start working on those "wonders" today. You wonder too don't you? Amen.

"The New Model"

Exodus 20:1-17

God is often silent. We wonder about those silences. We desire God to speak when we need to hear his voice. But those silent periods, we learn, are only interims. God has spoken in the past and He will certainly speak again. But if we regard God's silence as sometimes deafening then surely His speech is louder yet. The psalmist compares it to thunder (Ps.29). It is radical uncovering the roots of everything.

In the gospel for today we hear of Jesus cleansing the temple. That is Jesus at His most radical. Bristling with righteous anger He fashions for Himself a whip. Hear the bleating of the confused sheep, the bellowing of the oxen, the cries of surprised rage from the money changers who are

leaping out of the way of overturning tables. Hear Jesus cry, "take these things away!"

The epistle lesson today has Paul reflecting on the radical nature of the whole Christ event. "Christ crucified --a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power and wisdom of God." Whenever God meets the world, something has to change and God is unchangeable. Whenever God touches our existence something radical happens to us and to our world!

Long ago, God called Abraham promising to make out of him a people set apart for greatness. God gave him no rules, just asked him to follow. When that people now grown large found itself delivered from Egyptian bondage and slavery God made his radical will known. We have a name for this excellent summary of God's will for His people. We call it the "Ten Commandments." They were intended not as threatening laws, but as "ten easy steps to follow" for the smooth running of God's special society.

Think of the manual that accompanies a new car. It is printed by the auto manufacturer to assist the owner in keeping the car in good running condition. Directions such as, "lubricate every 10,000 miles" and "change oil every 5000 miles" are not intended to shame or frighten the owners, but to inform them. The factory which has built and tested the car is passing on the information necessary to the life of the car.

In the "Ten Words" as they are referred to in the Hebrew original (Deut.4:13) God handed Israel a manual containing ten easy steps to follow for the smooth maintenance of a growing nation. He had created them individually, and through the exodus He forged them into a nation. Knowing how they worked and just what makes people tick as a whole and as parts God revealed to Israel His radical good will.

The ten words are radical because they get back to the roots of existence. Originally inscribed into people's hearts those words had been crowded out by the thorns and weeds of sinful self-centeredness. We are Gods, humankind was wont to say. I am God says the first word. In its spiritual confusion, the world said, "There must be many gods". "You shall have no other Gods before me" the Lord advised His newly found people. "All right then," Israel said. "To make sure we don't forget you, we'll make a picture of you and set it up in front of us, and" "You shall make no pictures of me," God said. "I am incomparable!"

As Israel read on they slowly understood the nature of reality. As they meditated on the words of their manual they realized what a great blessing they had received in their instruction book. And their realization broke into praise: "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;

the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold! Sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

How happy they were! How easy it was! "Do this and you shall live!" They did it and they really lived! For a while. Oh, it was never perfect. Moses kicked things around, when he should have spoken. Eli didn't discipline his sons. And we needn't even mention David's affair. But by and large the machinery of Israel's nationhood was kept in fine running condition for about five centuries. A long time for any model!

Eventually though the inevitable happened. Israel forgot or got careless or greedy. In any case, the movement called Israel was grinding to a halt. As the chagrined motorist listens, the mechanic who towed the car in and checked it out, explains. "There wasn't a drop of oil in it mister. The crankcase was dry: rods, bearings, all shot! You'll need a whole new engine. But I wonder if it's worth it. Didn't you know it was out of oil?" The stunned owner thumbs sheepishly through the manual. "I used to change oil regularly. I would check it every time I filled up with gas. Guess I just forgot." His voice trails off.

Now the simple directive "Change oil every 5000 miles" is no longer helpful. It only accuses. So God sends mechanics to see what could be done for the coughing, wheezing, chugging, smoke-belching nation state of His people Israel. Amos diagnosed it first: "You have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood" (6:12) But basically, Amos was pessimistic. "Prepare to meet your God, O Israel," he concluded (4:12). A sort of permanent recall. Amos figured the Lord would take Israel's model off the market.

Hosea seems to have consulted the maintenance manual directly. His analysis of Israel's sorry plight was pretty much by the book. "Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel; for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or kindness and no knowledge of God in the land. There is swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and committing adultery. They break all the bounds and murder follows murder. Therefore the land mourns and all who dwell in it languish and also the beasts of the field and birds of the air; and even the fish of the sea are taken away." (Hos.4) Hosea had some confidence that the necessary repairs could be made. Isaiah and Micah agreed.

Later mechanics didn't. After over a century of prophetic tinkering Jeremiah and Ezekial agreed further repairs were in vain. They counseled Israel to turn in the

old wreck and to await with new confidence a new model. So Israel waited. For years almost beyond telling they waited. They didn't do much in those years besides wait and record the old words of promise and judgement. There was nothing new to be said. And then it happened. In the fullness of time God sent forth His new model-one operating perfectly in harmony with the owner's manual! The new Model was not a new nation, but a new person. The new Model was a new humanity, the first person of a new nation. The new Model was perfect in every way; the ideal product of the Manufacturer, the model after which many could be modeled.

The new model was Jesus. Jesus taught, indeed embodied, the ten words. When He cleansed the temple he was giving a dramatic and pointed object lesson on the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me, not even the gods of your good religious intentions." He said, "Think not that I have come to abolish the directives laid down in your model, I have come not to abolish them, but to fulfill them."

And so he did and more so! He knew, taught, and lived the truth so that the entire series of laws, words, commandments, and instructions could be summed up in one four letter word: "love." Even when we've misplaced the manual, even when our eyes are tired or our lives too dreary to pick it up and read it, surely we can remember the summary of it all: love. He loved and His love spoke plainly. He loved and His voice healed the sick. He loved and His love awakened the dead. He loved and the demons of hate squealed and fled. He loved until His loving heart stopped in His death on a cross.

"Why this?" wondered His beloved disciples. "Why should this crucifixion take Him from us just as we were beginning to learn the power of love?" But it had to be so. It was not enough for God to become human to show us how to love. He had to show us that His love was stronger than death, even His own death. He had to die, so that we might have more than a new manual of instructions. He had to die so that we might rise again to give us, and to place within us, a whole new way of existence!

We who believe have become the new models. By faith in Christ we move in the power of the Holy Spirit no longer checking our every action by an instruction book, but living freely, confidently, lovingly, knowing that the lawgivers, prophets, and angels have been awaiting the radically new existence that is now ours simply by faith.

Look in the mirror, O people of God, and see what God sees. You are the recipients of a new heart. Consider yourself to be what the world has been waiting for. Consider yourself to be the embodiment of the Ten Commandments for in Christ so you are--the newest model! Amen.

CHAPTER 10

Interview and Sermons: Chuck Shields
Pastor, Brentwood Presbyterian Church,
Los Angeles, Calif.

Interview

The number one, overwhelming, powerful theme in my preaching is the grace of God. This comes from my experience of divorce and discovering the grace of God that accepts me for who I am--not for what I do or don't do. I grew up with a conservative Christian background believing that divorce didn't exist as an option for Christians. I was always a pretty good kid--a student body officer and all --but I fell into the trap of thinking that God really loved me because I was great. All of a sudden the jig was up.

Now with my divorce I felt it was out in the open to everybody that I had really screwed up. It probably seemed a lot worse to me than to other people, but I felt horrible. But through therapy and the church I discovered that I was very much loved by God for who I am - not for what I do or don't do right. Grace therefore has been for me the most powerful shaping force in my whole ministry. And that's what I want to come through to baby boomers in my preaching.

There are so many people who need to experience God's acceptance. There are a lot of divorced people here in my church. We have one young man who's an architect who's in

his 30s, a man whom I've talked to a number of times. He's divorced. Well, as I say, I've been through a divorce and I share that with people because that experience enabled me to discover God's grace. So for the overall theme of my preaching, I think grace kind of captures it.

Under grace comes trusting the sovereignty of God. That sounds awfully Presbyterian! But it's exciting! I keep trying to soften people's hearts to trust Him to take over in their lives. Then the priesthood of all believers is real strong. You are empowered, you are special because you've given your heart to God. You need to know that and live that in your life! That also comes through my preaching and baby boomers respond to it. What do baby boomers struggle with?

Baby boomers are yearning for meaning; purpose is real strong with the people I see coming here. They are people who are willing to change their vocations, to do something that brings more meaning into their lives - not just willing to go after the buck. It's not that they aren't going after the bucks. It's just that meaning is the big question - what's it all about? "What gives me worth; what's really important in life?" I remember this one guy who's president of a film company who's been a real hard driver. He's been very successful. His father died. Boy, it tenderized his heart. He comes now and he's often in tears because he knows there's something more to his life.

Related to all this is how to find balance in the midst of all your activities. You may work for a law firm and are supposedly given four weeks of vacation a year, but you work so hard you never take the time. Why? Is it worth it? That's the major dynamic that I hear: meaning and looking for values.

There are also turn-offs. "Shoulds" and "oughts" are gross turn offs. I'm not very prophetic in the pulpit for that reason. Prophets are more, "here's right and here's wrong." I want to say, "We need to search together for the way, the truth, and the light."

My experience with baby boomers is that these people want to be happy and have "me" and "my" taken care of by and large. They tend to be very self-focussed. But I think there's an incredible spiritual hunger also. They've seen the hedonism of the 60s and 70s and the emptiness of that. They also now have children. When they themselves don't know how to satisfy the hunger in their own heart they know they can't spiritually satisfy their children. So they come to church and hear me preach.

I take the Bible very seriously. I put a lot of time into the Bible study and preparation. I'll often take as much as 5 to 10 minutes during the service to open up the scripture and comment on it. I'll talk about the Road to Jericho and whether it is today the way it was two thousand years ago. I'll answer the questions who were the priest

and the Levite and what did they represent? In essence as the people read I'll stop to comment verse by verse and say, "Look at this." Only then comes the sermon itself.

The ideal sermon to me is singular in point. One point is the hardest to prepare--and the best. I take that point and try to make it come alive so that people can walk out with something to remember: a phrase like, "You can give and not love, but you can't love and not give." Then I'll just keep massaging that, working it, and illustrating it.

I start preparing a sermon by getting my purpose into a sentence. One Sunday in Advent I did a sermon on Zachariah. My purpose was "to assist the worshippers in contrasting the hopelessness in life with the hope of the gospel." Another Sunday I preached a sermon on Mary. My purpose was, "to encourage worshippers to trust God's promise to make possible the impossible."

Yet another Sunday I preached on prayer. It was the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee. My purpose was "To enable the worshippers to experience that prayer is aligning their priorities with God's priorities." Another time I preached on suffering. My purpose was to show how "God is at work in the midst of suffering, changing grief into a gift." Let me explain that one.

This is the story of the Good Samaritan. God worked through the man who was beaten up. The Samaritan is lying by the road half dead. Now he could say, "Woe is me; I'm

half dead," give up, and die. Or he could be tenacious and say, "No, I'm half alive; I'm hanging on!" That's a way God works: He has given us this gift of the desire for life. Another way God works is through the people who come into our lives. God didn't work through the Levite and the priest. They didn't stop, but the Samaritan did! Look back in your life at the times you've suffered and think of the people who have come into your life to minister. Those people, or that person who help, are a gift from God.

Then I illustrate my sermon. I personalize them when I can. Watch any group. When do baby boomers, I think above all, come alive? When you start telling them your story. You start talking about your divorce and I'm listening. You start telling about having a baby--I'm listening. You start talking about the virgin birth or the deity of Christ and I'm saying, "Well, that's good." Those two things alone don't mean as much. I don't think that's good, but I experience it to be true.

In sermon preparation I have a routine. The first thing I do is read the scripture. I try to live inside the story. When a word triggers a response in me I write it down. Maybe a word will trigger a memory of a person or an experience. I'll write it down. I'll write down a beginning outline then I'll lay the outline down on the floor, study the scripture, and for 30 or 40 minutes just meditate and basically say, "Lord, what is the word that

needs to be heard from this today?" I don't hear voices; I don't know what happens, but it's only after then that I can begin to say, "Here's the gospel; here's what's good news in it." This process takes me through Friday morning. By noon, regardless of what kind of mood I was in before, I usually find myself laughing, joking, and smiling because I find scripture to be very hopeful.

Sermons

"Where is God When it Hurts?"
Luke 10:25-37

Exposition

We've been looking, as you know, at the parables of Jesus and asking, "how does God work in our world? How do we know God's present in our lives?" Two weeks ago we looked at two parables about growing seeds that started small but became great. Last week we looked at the parable of Lazarus and the rich man and explored the truth that we are each free to make choices in life. Those choices have certain implications, certain results. That was hard for some of you to hear and a number of you went out of here close to tears saying, "You know I feel like I've been faithful to God, I love God, I've made the best choices I can, yet my life is coming apart at the seams." So today I'd like to pick up the question, "How in the midst of being faithful to God, when you make decisions and it still doesn't go well and pain comes into your life how do you handle that? Where is God in our lives when things go badly?" In order to answer that question let's look at this parable of the Good Samaritan.

Verse 25: a teacher of the law (that's a lawyer - this was written for Brentwood church; half lawyers here!), a lawyer came up and tried to trap Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to receive eternal life?" (That's a good lawyer's question!) Jesus answered him, "What do the scriptures say? How do you interpret them?" The man answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as you love yourself." "Right," said Jesus. "Do this and you will live. But the

lawyer, looking for the loophole in the answer he's just given said, "Who is my neighbor?"

A very clear question, isn't it? Watch Jesus answer him. Jesus answered, "There was once a man" (the Greek word is "anthropos"--"everyman". Jesus doesn't define whether he's Jew or Gentile, black or white, whether he's gay or straight, whether this person is male or female even. This is an "every person"--"anthropos".) There was once an anthropos who was going down to Jerusalem to Jericho. That road is 17 miles long. It drops about 1300 feet in those 17 miles. If you've been there, you know it's desolate territory. It's just a mile north of the Dead Sea - the lowest spot on the face of the earth. It's hot, it's dirty, it's dusty. He was traveling the road alone going from Jerusalem to Jericho when robbers attacked him, stripped him, beat him up leaving him half dead.

Now it so happened that a priest was going down the road, but when he saw the man he walked by on the other side. The same way a Levite passed by. A Levite's just kind of an advanced priest, a specialist in the law. A priest is kind of a practitioner, the local parish pastor. The Levite is one who's really studied the law--is an expert --so he is even a little more religious in a way. A Levite also came there, went over, looked at the person then walked by on the other side.

Notice the beauty of Jesus as a storyteller. No motives are given either for why anthropos was going from Jerusalem to Jericho when he probably shouldn't have been and shouldn't have been alone. No motives; it just was what was happening. The priest and the Levite passed by. We don't know why. They may have had good reason. Jesus doesn't deal with the motives, he only looks at the behavior. But a Samaritan came. They were cousins of the Jews--they were Jews, but they were also hated by the Jews for one very specific reason. 150 years before Jesus told the story a clan of Jews called the Maccabees arose, organized the resistance forces, and chased the Syrians out of Jerusalem. The Syrians were a foreign occupation force prior to the Romans who were occupying the temple. The Maccabees chased them out. We remember that and celebrate that in our society today with the feast of Hanukkah, the feast of lights, that's around our Christmas time. The Samaritans, cousins of the Jews, sided with the Syrians against the Maccabees. So Jews didn't like the Samaritans.

The Samaritan was traveling that way and came upon "everyman." When he saw him, his heart (that's really his viscera--the Greek word can be translated his "gut"), his gut was filled with pity. He had compassion on him. So he went over to him, he poured oil and wine on his wounds, and bandaged them up. Then he put the man on his own animal. He took him to the inn where he took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the

innkeeper. "Take care of him," he told the innkeeper, "and when I come back this way I will pay you whatever else you spend on him."

The beauty of Jesus' story is the man does some things, but he doesn't do everything. He doesn't take the man home, he doesn't set him up in his house and care for him the rest of his life. He doesn't go to the bank and take out a loan. But Jesus concluded, "Which one of these acted like a neighbor?" Actually the Greek changes it to a verb: "Who 'neighbored' the man attacked by the robbers?" I mean, you talk about L.A. Law! Jesus out-lawyered the lawyer in this case! The lawyer, for his part, could only answer one thing. (Watch his answer!) The lawyer answered, "Well, the one who was kind to him, of course." Jesus said, "You go, then, and do the very same thing." May God bless to our experience, as well as to our understanding, the reading of his word. Let's bow for a moment of prayer.

As you go inside, take a moment to look at your own life. Each one of us here is on a journey. What are the pains that your journey has brought you? Offer them silently to our Lord Who are the people who've come into your life to bring some healing in words or an act of kindness? Focus on them, and offer them silently to our Lord Lord, our God, you know what's brought each of us to this place today. You know where we hurt. You know where we need the healing oil and ointments of your love. Touch us, comfort us, and heal us we pray. Lord, you know where in our lives we have the opportunity to be a Samaritan. Strengthen us, give us viscera that are filled with compassion. We are your people. May we in these moments sense your spirit moving in us and among us. Touch us, Lord. To that end may the words of my mouth, but far more importantly may the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Lord we pray this in the name of your Son, who taught us when we're together to pray, "Our Father"

Sermon

Where is God when we hurt? That's the question I'd like to address this morning, and I'd like to address that question because seated in this congregation are people who hurt. Every person here has or is or will be hurting. Listen to some of the prayer requests that you all have phoned into this office, put on the chain of prayer. I actually went back a couple of years to pull out some requests so we're not trying to figure out who it is right now. But these would be the kind of prayer requests that come every day in to the office of the church. The ones I'm going to read are about a two weeks supply of prayer

requests from this congregation. Listen. Prayers for an 88 year old grandfather who's lost his eyesight. He's depressed and he wants to die. He hurts. Prayers for good results in a biopsy--hardly a week goes by that we don't have that prayer request. Prayers for a friend with a brain tumor. Prayers for a brother who is HIV positive. We've lost four people from this congregation, one a member and three others who are parts of families, because of AIDS. It's a terrible epidemic that somehow has got to be cured. It's a pain. It's awful.

Prayers for strength for a family going through bankruptcy because a business venture went bad. Prayers for a family seeking strength to confront a father in an alcohol intervention. Prayers for children whose parents are going through a divorce...three month old baby girl born with a hole in her heart...a friend eight months pregnant who's husband was killed in an accident...that's this congregation, folks; it's not the papers. Where is God when we hurt, and how does He work? That's the question I think our parable opens for us and it gives us two parts of an answer. See how they fit for you. Part number one: suffering happens. It's circumstance. God doesn't create it. God doesn't send it on you. It just happens. Suffering happens. Everyman was going from Jerusalem to Jericho. Why? We don't know, but God didn't send him. Why did he happen to be going alone? We don't know, but it wasn't God's fault; it was a choice that "everyman" had made. Now he might even have made it from Jerusalem to Jericho except there happened to be a group of robbers in the hills that day.

Now they didn't work every day, surely. They must have taken a day off once in a while, but they were there that day. And even if they were there that day, they might have just robbed somebody in front of "everyman" and then be off hiding their goods and not there to rob "everyman". Why did they happen to be there to rob him? It wasn't because God sent them. God doesn't work that way. It happened. It was circumstance. You see pain, suffering, and crisis come with life. They are a reality.

Florence Wuellner, adjunct professor at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, also a UCC minister and a gifted writer and retreat leader, has written about five types of suffering that human beings experience. Listen to them: Number one, there's the thorn in the flesh type suffering. That's illness, accidents, and disabilities. That's the baby girl I was talking about who was born with a hole in her heart. She didn't choose that. She didn't create it, and God surely didn't send it on her. It's circumstance; it just happened. That's the thorn in the flesh. Second, Wuellner says, there's hunger. That is, the suffering that arises from deprivation-physically, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. It's the kind of suffering

that some of you seated here experience by being born into families with alcoholic parents, and by being deprived of the love and the affirmation that can be given to you by a normal healthy family. You didn't choose it; it's a circumstance. God sure didn't send it on you.

The third type Wuellner talks about is what she calls "catapult suffering". That's social evil and injustice that's thrown upon us like a catapult. It's racism, sexism, ageism that exists in our world--you don't choose that. I don't know how many pastors I've listened to who are in their mid to late '50's who'd like to move to another church. But no church wants to hire them. Who wants to hire somebody that's less than 10 years away from retirement? Now it's not their fault that they're in their 50's. It happens to be because they were born at a certain time, that's all. And all of us, God willing, are going to reach that age. So we experience the suffering that comes from these external forces that exist in our world. Those three types of suffering, says Wuellner, are not voluntary. They just happen; they come upon us. Many of us here have experienced them.

Then Wuellner says the last two are self chosen. Her fourth is the cross. The cross is the voluntary lifting of the burdens of others and putting them on our shoulders, voluntarily taking suffering on ourselves because of our faith. Maybe you read this past summer about the Habitat For Humanity project that happened in Southern California. Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter were involved. People travelled from Pasadena to San Diego and a hundred homes were built in Tijuana and seven homes were built in San Diego. A good friend of mine, Woody Garvin, pastor of the Rancho Bernardo Presbyterian Church, was president of the Habitat chapter for that venture. So the Carters worshipped with him at Rancho Bernardo and visited in his home. He told me what real and humble people the Carters are. The ex-president and first lady of this nation stayed in a tent in Tijuana. Secret Service had a camper, a mobile home, but the Carters stayed in a tent right along with everybody else.

The media was constantly wanting to get at them and Jimmy Carter was frustrated because it would interfere with his work. He wanted to work and build homes for people. At night the people in the tent next to them, who were members of the Rancho Bernardo Church told Woody afterwards, "You know, we'd come in sore and stiff, complaining about the food and how hard the ground was and in the tent next to us we'd hear Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter reading the scripture to one another in Spanish. It's the way they practiced their Spanish. Now they didn't have to be doing that. That's the cross. That's the voluntary suffering we take upon ourselves on behalf of others. And many of you have done that, and you know it feels different. It's suffering. It's real, but it feels very different.

The final kind of suffering that Wuellner talks about is birth. That is, suffering that comes about because of an awakening in our lives. Suddenly, through a spiritual pilgrimage that you've been on, you become aware you can't continue in the job you're in. Or perhaps you feel you've got to do something different so, at great cost to yourself and perhaps your family, you go through one of those mid-life crises and you choose a different job, or go through that mid-life crisis and you grow your hair and people torture you about it. [laughter] (You've been great, by the way!) You know I could cut my hair and you wouldn't have to change jobs if you didn't want to, but we take it on ourselves because of something that's going on inside us. Pain is a part of life: it's a reality.

But that's only half of the story. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Christian martyr who was hanged by the Nazi's prior to the end of World War II said, "I know two things for sure about every human being I meet. Number one, I know you're in crisis, and number two, I know you're loved. It's the second part of the equation that makes all the difference. Pain is a reality. God doesn't send it. But God does stand with us in the midst of the pain, the suffering, the crises in life, and that makes all the difference. Not only that, but God turns grief into a gift - as the country and western song back a few years said, "from teardrops to diamonds." Through God that which is bad in life can become something good. How? There are two ways. Number one God works inside us to change our attitude about the experiences that come upon us.

"Everyman" was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. He was beaten. He was half dead, lying alongside the road. But he was only half dead. That means he had two choices. He could have chosen to focus on death and said, "Woe is me. It's hot out here; I'm gonna die anyway; it's all over" and given up and quit. Or he could choose to focus on the other half of the equation. He's only half dead, which means he is half alive. He can focus on that and choose life and apparently that's what he did.

One of you, this last summer, when I asked for requests for topics you'd like considered in sermons, wrote this: "How can I believe that I should choose this life as it is when I so desperately want someone to love and to build and to grow with? Why has God decided this for me? I've been single for 15 years now." It's a painful request. It's real for a number of us. We know the circumstances are the same but you have a choice about how you respond to it. Two summers ago now I was in Israel with a Benedictine monk, Father Gregory. We talked a lot about what it was to choose a celibate life versus being married and having family. Now Father Gregory is a lover: he's a wonderful man and he said, "You know it's painful. It's very painful for me often

times, but I focus on Christ and it's helped me understand just a little bit more the pain of the cross.

You see, our attitude changes how we experience life. Barbara Johnson, a woman who wrote a funny little book called Stick a Geranium in Your Hat and be Happy had some profound truth greater than the title of the book. She said this: "Pain and suffering are inevitable in life. Misery is optional." Pain is inevitable. Misery is optional. The difference is our attitude. God works from within us to change our attitude about what's happening. In all things give thanks, and watch your suffering change. That's why we as Christians are accused of being optimists. We are, you know. You know who the ultimate optimist is? Somebody who gets a parking ticket and then celebrates that the system's working. [laughter] It's the attitude we have.

Now the second way God works in the midst of that suffering is by sending people into our lives. The Samaritan happened to be traveling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. So was a priest and Levite. They didn't stop. Why did the Samaritan stop? Because God had worked from within him. His heart was open. He went out in compassion to the man. Any of you who have been in crisis can testify as clearly as I can that people come into your life when they don't even know they are channels of God. When I was going through a divorce it was a congregation in Northern California. For an alcoholic it may be a sober alcoholic. It may be AA. It's somebody who confronts, who speaks the word of truth, but with love and compassion.

I have a friend, Jimmy, who, some years ago, in the early '40s, was injured in his junior year of high school in an accident. Jimmy developed an osteomyelitis staff infection in his hip prior to penicillin and spent almost a year in the terminal ward of a Cleveland hospital in a body cast. There were twelve men in that ward. Jimmy's father, who was a Scotch Presbyterian and a staunch man, would visit his son and at the end of the visit say in a loud enough voice that everybody could hear, "Jimmy I want to pray for this house." And he'd pray for everybody there.

In the middle of the night when the lights were dim and the nurses and doctors were gone, since Jimmy was in a body cast and couldn't move, the other men would get up, one at a time, over and over again and come to his bed and talk to him and ask him about his faith, and about the future that awaited each of them. They saw each other dying. Jimmy said, "I didn't even know what I believed then and, if anything, why God had let this happen to me." Yet he drew on the only thing he knew and would quote scripture to them and give answers that he'd heard in Sunday School and church, though they weren't yet real for him.

Miraculously, somehow, Jimmy survived what he was not supposed to. And in a couple of hours I'm going to get on a plane to go to Northern California and spend the night in.

his home. He's now a retired Presbyterian pastor--a wonderful man who was a channel of God working in the lives of those twelve at a time when even he didn't know for certain what he believed. So God works from inside us and from outside us. From inside to change our feelings and from outside with the people and experiences He sends into our lives. God is there when we hurt.

"Letting Love Rule"
Matthew 20:1-16

There is an entire industry that has grown up in airports across this nation that's built around the need of parents to bring gifts to children upon returning from trips. You have that experience? If you're like me whenever you're travelling when you're involved with whatever you're doing it's not until you get to the airport and you have a little time before the plane takes off you realize that in a matter of a few hours you're going to be face to face with, in my case, two little girls and you better have something to give to them or your name is mud!

Now I have an added challenge to my own life in that I have two daughters who are 13 months apart. They love each other dearly and if any of you were to attack the other they would fiercely defend the sister. On the other hand, they can become intensely jealous of one another so I quickly had to learn that the gifts I needed to get them needed to be not only of equal value, but, for a period of time, virtually needed to be the same. I mean it got so extreme I could buy Gummy Bears for the two of them, I could divide them up and count them out to make sure they got exactly the same number of Gummy Bears each and when I gave it to them one or the other would start yelling because, "She got more yellow Gummy Bears than I got and yellow's my favorite color!" They'd be into it with each other and out would come their favorite phrase, a phrase we've dealt with for almost ten years with these two girls and the phrase is, "It's not fair!" You ever have your kids say that? "It's not fair!"

Now as I thought about that experience and thought about adults that I've listened to I realized we don't give up that attitude as we grow in life. Many of you in different ways have used that same phrase. I was in love and the relationship didn't work out. It just doesn't seem fair. I've so much living to do when all of a sudden they found this tumor in my body. It just is not fair. I have this beautiful child and something's happened to the child. Why did it have to happen to the child? It's just not fair. I had a job; I was dismissed from the job. It really wasn't

my fault. It's just not fair. Do you ever have that feeling? That life's just not fair?

That's what I'd like you to focus on this morning. In fact look into your own experience and see if you can find some area of your life right now where you feel like it's not quite fair. Maybe in a relationship, maybe in a job, maybe in what's happening to you, but find an area. If you can't find one in your own life look back in your history and find a time when you experienced that it just wasn't fair and if you can't do that look at somebody you know well and find an unfairness in their life and hold on to that; focus on that because I believe this scripture passage gives us a key to how we might unlock a fuller experience of life and overcome that sense of it's just not being fair.

I think if my girls could get the clue that this passage is going to give us they'd be so much happier in life. It's what I would like to be able to communicate to them. Okay, you have it? The picture in your mind? Hold onto that as we explore the principle because it's going to be singular, it's going to be incredibly simple, and yet very complex to apply.

To start out let's look at the workers and the all day workers are the ones you want to picture because they're the ones described in this story. Why at the end of the day where they grumble, why do they feel like life wasn't fair? it wasn't because of objective reality. In fact objectively they were incredibly blessed. They were the first chosen.

Have you ever been in a situation like when you're in grade school and they're choosing teams one side or the other--and you know how horrible it is not to be chosen first, not to be among the first. It gets worse the farther along you go. If you're the last chosen it feels terrible doesn't it? The all day workers were the first chosen. They should feel good about themselves in contrast to those fifth hour workers, the ones who only worked one hour. See they're the first chosen.

Second, they got exactly what was agreed upon. They'd agreed upon a fair day's wage: one silver coin. That's what had been promised and that's what they got. They got what was agreed on in life. Why should they feel cheated about that? Furthermore they had the benefit of an entire day of meaningful work. Now vacations are nice when we get a break, aren't they? But sisters and brothers, talk to anyone in this congregation who has experienced being out of work, and know that it's hell. It literally is what kills many people who retire. I believe God created us for meaningful work and if you don't find the meaningful activity for your life at whatever age you are in whatever you're doing, life is going to begin to putrify, go sour on you. We're meant to have meaningful work.

For eleven hours these last hour workers spent the day standing on the street corner feeling bad about themselves

that they could not provide for their families; they had no job. The all day workers had the benefit of meaningful work all day long. Those dudes should have been rejoicing at the end of the day, but they were grumbling. Why? I believe we should be rejoicing. We often grumble. Why?

I believe their focus got clouded in life. Instead of focussing on the owner, the lord of the vineyard, the one who in the story is God, instead of focussing on the lord of the vineyard they shifted their focus to their fellow workers. They began to compare themselves with one another and that's where the unhappiness came in in their life. That's exactly where the unhappiness comes in with my daughters. They have so much. If only they'd look at what they have rather than what the other has. It always looks so much better what the other has than what I have. They create their own sense of unhappiness, not because of objective reality, but because of their focus.

A few months ago I, after a number of years, had an eye appointment again and was introduced to these disposable contacts which I'm loving. I wore contacts for years and then couldn't because of a change in the eyes. The hard contacts began clouding my vision. Clouding reality. It wasn't until I took them off that I could see clearly.

I believe we put in front of our eyes lenses that cloud the truth about who we are and who we've been created to be and what's given to us. Let me just enumerate a few lenses and then you can make up your own list. One of the lenses that many people put in front of their eyes is the lens of fear. I call it the God-grudge lense. They fear that God is going to somehow punish them, that things are not going to be good. They're never going to be adequate, so they begin to feel insecure in relationships with other people, often become clingy, become demanding. They're difficult to enter into a relationship with if you're trying to do business with them because they approach you out of a sense of fear about life, rather than if we take off that clouded lens of fear and focus more clearly on the Lord of the vineyard, the one who created us, we see that we can trust. We are created in the image of God. We're a magnificent part of creation.

We can walk down the street with pride. There's no need that you should ever walk away from anybody. You are the pinnacle of creation. You're created in the image of God. You can trust that. You're very valuable. You don't need to fear. You need to trust and when we do it makes an incredible difference.

You remember in 1978 the Camp David Accords? Jimmy Carter was president then and invited Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat to Camp David and what came out of that was as far as I know, the only peace treaty, at least in modern history, between Israelis and Arabs. Between Jews and Muslims. Because of what came out of that Anwar Sadat won

the Nobel Peace Prize and eventually lost his life as the only Arab leader who is willing to make some kind of a peace treaty with the Israelis. You know what Jimmy Carter says is the secret to the success of that time? At his invitation the three of them--these three world leaders, Christian, Jew, and Muslim--began every day with prayer. Is that amazing? These three leaders sat down and prayed together every day. It shifted their focus to the Creator who is the source of their lives and Carter maintains that's what opened the opportunity for the discovery of peace between Jews and Muslims. It was a difference in focus. So we need to take away the distorted lens of fear that we put in front of our eyes and look to the Lord of the vineyard, the owner, for He is One we can trust.

There's another lens we can put in front of our eyes. It's called the lens of anger. I know there are some of you seated in here who pay a lot of money for therapy to get in touch with your anger and to learn to express anger. See there is a good part of anger. Anger is what allows us to speak out against injustice. Socially it's anger that has fueled some of the great revolutions in the world, some of the great social movements including the American Revolution. It was our anger at unjust taxation. It's anger that has caused us to respond to Iraq in the present Middle East crisis. There's something good about anger, but look at anger for a minute.

Anger is an interim emotion. It can last only a short while: that's true of revolutions, that's true in personal relationships, that's true of business. If you live on a diet of anger, it will become a cancer that will eat you alive. We need to remove that distorting lens of anger and look instead to the lord of the vineyard, the owner where we discover the One who is love, who is forgiveness, who is reconciliation and when we discover that life becomes much healthier.

The final lens that I would hold up is the lens that I call the lens of scarcity. It's the one that holds before us the myth that there's a scarcity of resources in the world rather than plenty in the world. And in fact it was the one, one of the ones, that the all day workers had. They wanted more of the resources for them. It's a very powerful, destructive distortion of life. Instead of seeing the bounty and the plenty of creation, looking at the owner who gives us all, we look at life and feel like it's scarce and have to hold onto and hoard for ourselves.

I stand here to confess to you this morning I'm one who feels most guilty of that distorting lens of scarcity. I don't know why. I grew up with parents who are farmers from the mid west. They'd been through the depression. I wasn't through the depression, but somehow I had that sense that we had to pinch every penny. So I became not just tight, but

stingy. In fact I'm going to trust you telling this story because it's an embarrassing story, but it's a true story.

That distorted lens of stinginess or scarcity causes us to do terrible things to each other. When I was in high school and just beginning to date, and after this experience I did take quite awhile and you'll see why in a minute, just beginning to date, I took a girl who had been in our youth group out for dinner one night. I don't remember if we went to a dance or a movie or something first, but I remember we went to dinner and I was so afraid that she was going to order something really expensive, right? I was so afraid that when we got to the restaurant and sat down for dinner we looked at the menu, and I looked at the prices which were very cheap compared to here, and I looked at her and I said, "All right chubby, what'll you have to eat?"

Needless to say I never had another date with that girl. She has, however, remained a friend, but that's because of her gracefulness, not because of mine. That's how distorted and fearful I'd become. Now I justified that by saying it was just a joke and all that kind of thing to myself ahead of time, but it was a horrible thing to do. That distortion of reality continued on with me until I met the woman that I'm married to today and in an interesting way, she has ministered to me. It's been a process, it's not all over, but basically she has a very different attitude about money and about resources. She said, you know--now I'm supposed to be the preacher right--she says, "I just believe that all of life is a gift from God and God has promised to provide for us. That has happened every single day of our existence so far. Therefore we ought to take what He gives to us and use it."

This came about because in the first years of our marriage the primary argument we had was over money--how to manage money. She began to say, "There's got to be a way to reduce this conflict in our relationship." We started talking this through and out of that we arrived at a process whereby we would put our focus on the Creator: trust in God that we would be taken care of, and we have even with this new method of operating. We then set up a budget and when I start hassling with her she says, "Aren't I supposed to have a certain amount out of this budget to spend and have I been spending more than that?" She does what she says she's going to do and then I get crazy about the rest of it and she calms us down. But what's happened is by refocussing on the gifts of God to us and not worrying about accumulating great savings and reserves, it's eliminated a lot of hassle in our lives and freed up incredible, wonderful time for enjoyment of each other and of life. It's taken that distortion away.

Now that same thing is true for us as we look at the gifts that we make every year and a part of this process for Nadj and I is to decide what portion we are going to give to

ministry. We made that commitment. It's a percentage commitment and we don't have to hassle about it. It frees up incredible amounts of energy. It puts our focus on the one who is the giver of life. What's true for us as individuals is also true for us as a church and I'm really proud of this Session compared to the governing bodies of many churches that hassle about money. They work hard to be responsible in budgeting, but then trust God and trust you as the people and the gifts.

We're behind every year at this time. We are right now. We're going to end the year in the black--I have bets with Georgia our elder on budget/finance. Every year we do and it frees up incredible amounts of time to then focus on programming and mission and ministry outside the walls of the church. See we need to take away that distorting lens of the myth of scarcity and see how God has promised to give to us generously and always has. There's not one person seated here for whom God has gone against His promise that He will care for you each day by giving you what you need for that day. You've had it or you wouldn't be here right now. God keeps His promises. We need to shift the focus to the Creator.

Now if we can do that, if my daughters can do that and take this distorted focus off of the competition with each other, their lives will be so much fuller. So will ours. Remember that song a few years ago? "I can see clearly now the rain is gone; I can see all the obstacles in my way. Gone are the dark clouds that hide the sun; it's gonna be a bright, sunshiny day." That's what we get when we focus on the Creator. The obstacles are still there and they're real, but they become much more manageable because we look to the Lord of the vineyard who is love and we let love rule in our lives.

CHAPTER 11

Conclusion

What then are the overall findings of this project and what are the implications for reaching baby boomers through preaching? Baby boomers: the Spock generation, TV generation, Pepsi generation, Love generation, Woodstock generation, generation, Big Chill generation, the Me generation. Baby Boomers are a product of World War II, nuclear fears, television, Sputnik, rock and roll, the Cuban missile crisis, the Kennedy and King assassinations, the protest movement, Vietnam, and the counter culture of the '60s.

The baby boom generation, disillusioned by Vietnam and Watergate and suspicious of institutions, dropped out of church during the turbulent sixties and stayed away. Now some baby boomers are beginning to return to church in record numbers, but they are not, as yet, choosing to join mainline denominational churches with any frequency. Many who grew up in mainline denominational churches continue to stay away altogether.

I am concerned about this. Why? I think many baby boomers who dropped out of their mainline churches have been searching for answers in a disappointing and confusing world. As I have said some have turned to fundamentalism,

but have been turned off by the rigidity and hypocrisy of legalism. Others have turned to New Age spirituality, but have been disillusioned by its deification of the self and its lack of a central moral core.

I believe, because of their theological heritage, mainline churches provide the balance of morality, faith, and freedom that the baby boom generation needs to discover. One of the characteristics of mainline churches is an approach to the gospel that is both personal and corporate. Mainline churches have been willing both to grapple with social issues and to provide a prophetic voice in dealing with global concerns. The mainline denominations also have the ability and willingness to walk with people as they travel on their journey of faith.

I believe that mainline denominational churches offer the gospel in a way that allows a person to struggle with it and discover God's will for them in the world. Mainline churches also understand the whole business of being an ecumenical church, of being larger than any one denomination, of being open to people who are united in a commitment to Christ, but who may see things differently in other areas.

Baby boomers need to hear what the mainline churches have to say. But I am also concerned that the disproportionate absence of younger adults of the baby boom generation in the mainline churches has been seen as a major

factor in the numerical decline of the mainline denominations.

It is not that, in a culture that all too readily worships youth and distorts the importance of being and looking young, that the younger adults of the baby boom generation ought to be seen as being of more value as members than adults of preceding generations. Ageism, much like sexism or racism, could only exert a destructive influence on the church and prevent mature adults from discovering their full humanity within Christ's Church. Yet the fact remains that the graying of the mainline churches is cause for concern in terms of church growth. A Doonesbury cartoon put it this way:

1. [the mainline preacher looks balefully out at the sanctuary sighing] "Well, here goes nothing"

2. [aside to the organist as he enters] "Something with majesty maestro!"

3. [launching into his message] "Good morning. In recent times, there's been a growing hunger for hard answers to help us live in a confusing world."

4. "For many, this has meant a turn to the rigidity of fundamentalism, whose narrow framework breeds hypocrisy and tolerates only intolerance."

5. [closeup] "At the other extreme, non-doctrinaire New Age spirituality has won adherents with its concept that the individual is both holy and wholly unaccountable."

6. [warming to his topic] "While New Age exalts free will, Fundamentalism represses it. Neither truly channels it for the common good."

7. [closer] "All this has left a remarkable opportunity for those of us who believe in mainstream religion! More than ever before, society needs our message of the brotherhood of man!"

8. [really into it now] "Yes, our time has come!" [wide angle shot to include the whole congregation. A "50-something" parishioner in bow tie and spectacles, the lone worshipper, replies] "Good thing."¹

What is the preaching like that communicates best to baby boomers? Preaching that most effectively communicates to baby boomers is biblical, personal, and practical. This project has identified these three characteristics based on interviews with four mainline pastors who are preaching to a growing number of baby boomers in their congregations. Prior to this project, both Michael Williams and Bob Bast (see Chapter 6) identified these characteristics as most effective in preaching to baby boomers as well. Yet this project is original in that it not only independently confirms their findings, but substantiates them based on research, and presents how these three preaching characteristics may most effectively be used in preaching situations.

This project suggests that biblical preaching is most effective with baby boomers when it introduces and explains characters, background, and doctrines in contemporary terms. This project suggests that personal preaching is most effective with baby boomers when it emphasizes how the story of the gospel can be seen as the story of our lives. And this project suggests that practical preaching is most effective with baby boomers when intrinsic to its "how to,"

life-oriented focus is the underlying "how to" of how to make meaning out of a disillusioning and confusing world.

In an article entitled "Twenty-One Steps to Reaching the Baby Boomers," church growth analyst Lyle Schaller writes:

In recent years I have asked several thousand new members this question: "Why did you join this church? There are lots of churches around here; why did you pick this one?" Younger adults usually begin their response by praising the preaching, the meaningful content of the sermons, and the communication skills of the preacher. This is especially pronounced among those who (a) left the denomination in which they were reared when they joined this congregation and (b) were born after 1955. By contrast, a majority of those born before 1935 identify their denominational affiliation as the number-one factor in choosing a new church home. It is difficult to overstate the power of good preaching today, and it usually is the number-one factor in determining where the baby boomers go to church.²

Schaller is quick to point out a difference between older and younger baby boomers in this survey. Older baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1956, says Schaller, are choosing churches more with an emphasis on children's educational ministries and contemporary worship. Younger baby boomers, born between 1956 and 1964 though, are choosing a church with an emphasis on preaching.³

Whether contemporary worship, children's ministries, or preaching is most important to baby boomers in choosing a church, the data shows that preaching is of great significance. According to a recent survey of baby boomers who have selected a church, the five most cited reasons for

choosing a church are the worship service, the pastor, good sermons, feeling accepted, and programs for children. While the worship service is the most cited reason for selecting a congregation, the pastor and good sermons are the next most cited reasons.⁴

This project introduces four mainline preachers who are preaching to growing numbers of baby boomers. One thing, of course, that all four preachers share in common is that none of them intentionally thinks of preaching only to baby boomers in the preparation and delivery of their sermons. They are first of all preachers of the gospel which means communicating the good news to every generation old and young alike. The preaching of the gospel transcends all considerations of age and eras. But these four preachers are all aware of the special challenge they as mainline preachers face in communicating to what is still the missing generation in mainline churches.

In addition to preaching that is biblical, personal, and practical these four preachers provide many additional insights into preaching to baby boomers. Gary Collins, rector of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in San Pedro, challenges his listeners to think of the gospel story as their story. Make connections between the gospel story and people's lives, he suggests, by pointing out that the guidance and direction in the Bible can be their own. Collins says to share how the gospel story has helped you.

satisfy your own spiritual longings on your personal spiritual journey. Do not just give a dissertation or treatise on this spiritual journey. Do not just theologize about approaches to God. Instead deal with the hard questions and tough decisions of living, preaching in an experiential, conversational way.

Bob Morley, pastor of Newport Center United Methodist Church in Corona Del Mar, appreciates the impact that the entertainment media have had on the baby boom generation. In light of the influence of commercial television he prepares sermons with a beginning, middle, and end--but not necessarily in that order. Morley suggests you flashback and flash forward in presenting your thoughts. Make sermons less predictable by weaving ideas together in a less linear way. Emphasize story telling as a powerful attention getting device. Appreciate that in preaching to baby boomers, the impact of the phrase, "Now I want to tell you a story," is greater than preceding generations. And share your own story as sermon illustrations by way of encouraging your listeners to see how God is speaking to them through their own life stories.

Rick Nelson, pastor of Cross and Crown Lutheran Church in Rancho Cucamonga, stresses the importance of getting right at the "so what" of your text and making a connection for your listeners' everyday lives. Strive to be brief. Condense and preach to an attention span of a generation

that is significantly shorter than the preceding generation. Preach 15 to 20 minutes.

Focus on life as a constant battle for meaning with no neatly packaged answers. Struggle openly with life issues, revealing your own struggles, frustrations, and failures. Challenge baby boomers to think, question, and wrestle with the questions of living. Realize that baby boomers, as no other generation, want to hear someone who is excited about what they are doing. Communicate, from the heart, knowing that baby boomers will know and respond to the difference.

Chuck Shields, pastor of Brentwood Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles emphasizes the "take away" points in his preaching. He suggests preachers reduce their purpose to one sentence. Appreciate, maintains Shields, that baby boomers, even more than preceding generations, come alive when you start telling your story. Study and meditate on the scripture lesson, asking the question, "Lord, what is the word that needs to be heard from this today?" Also be aware that baby boomers are now experiencing an incredible spiritual hunger. There is an emptiness born of the hedonism of the '60s and '70s and now baby boomers are looking to satisfy their spiritual hunger.

Realize that grace speaks to a deep yearning within the baby boom generation. Speak to the broken hearts and failed lives of a generation in search of God's forgiveness and acceptance. Introduce grace as the underlying theme of your

preaching. Express to baby boomers how, despite their failures and the brokenness of their lives, they need to trust God to take charge of their lives.

NOTES

Chapter 11

¹ G.B. Trudeau, Recycled Doonesbury - Second Thoughts on a Gilded Age (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1990), 17.

² Schaller, "Twenty-One Steps," 1.

³ Schaller, interview.

⁴ "Why Baby Boomers Return to Church," 16.

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